



Topic
Literature
& Language

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Writing

Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft

Course Guidebook

Professor Brooks Landon
The University of Iowa



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Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft

Scope:

Just sentences. This is a course that will run through all the ways that sentences get longer—and shorter. We will touch upon whatever we can learn about how they work, what they do, how we can think and talk about them in ways that will help both our own writing and our understanding of prose style. Part of our concern will be with stretching our sense of options—all the things a sentence can be and/or do—and part with the notion of style itself. In other words, this is a course in which we will dance with language, not a course in which we will trudge toward remedial correctness.

As we work with sentences, we will examine, think about, and write sentences suggested by the following terms, some traditional, some nontraditional, and most of them probably unfamiliar: kernels and masters, predicatives, subordinatives, conjunctives, cumulatives, Suspensives, adjectivals, adversatives, interruptives, Intensives, cohesives, extensives, Balances, Serials, and so on. These *terms* refer more or less to rhetorical phenomena—ways in which sentences do whatever they do. In many cases the terms overlap and should probably be thought of as suggesting qualities demonstrated by sentences rather than as kinds or categories of sentences. Always, our focus will be on understanding a sentence's strategy based on these terms not on the importance of the terminology itself.

Sentences are shaped by specific context and driven by specific purpose, so no rules or mechanical protocols can prepare us for the infinite number of tasks our sentences must accomplish. There are a number of basic strategies or moves we can learn that help make our sentences more effective, no matter what the specific task. This course will concentrate on a broad range of effective moves or strategies, many of them associated with the cumulative sentence, a particularly useful syntax employed by professional writers and best understood in terms first laid out by Francis Christensen. Before we can work with a specific syntax, such as the cumulative or its

opposite, the suspensive, we need to understand the basic principles that guide the creation and use of all sentences. Accordingly, this course will look closely and carefully at sentences from a number of different angles, starting with their underlying logic and moving through the reasons why we cannot rigorously separate the form of a sentence from its content, its meaning from its style. We will look at the ways sentences work, whether the most basic and minimal kernel sentences that are nothing more than a subject joined with a verb, to the most elaborate and extended master sentences, some stretching to lengths of more than one hundred words.

Whether short or long, sentences are the most important building blocks of prose, the foundation of written communication, and always the essential units of prose style. “This is what I mean when I call myself a writer,” writes novelist Don DeLillo, “I construct sentences.” We will look at the ways in which DeLillo and other accomplished writers construct their sentences. Sentences convey information, organizing it into propositions or statements and then combining those propositions through syntactical arrangements that establish the logical relationships between and among them. Thus sentences join ideas, sometimes just putting them side-by-side, sometimes subordinating one to another, sometimes marking temporal or causal relationships. So one of our first goals will be to understand how sentences combine ideas to present information—and how we can use our knowledge of the ways in which sentences combine ideas to present our own ideas more effectively.

But sentences do much more than just convey information: The way in which a sentence unfolds its meaning may be as important as the propositional content—the information—it presents. The sequences of words we identify as sentences are capable of providing pleasure just as surely as they are capable of conveying crucial information. Sometimes, the most important information sentences convey is pleasure, as they unfold their meanings in ways that tease, surprise, test, and satisfy. Sometimes, the way sentences unfold their meaning is the most important meaning they offer. When we talk about sentences *as sentences*, as the essential building blocks of prose that may be as or even more important for the ways in which they organize and present ideas than they are for the information in those ideas, we talk about their style, usually suggesting that a sentence can be understood in

two ways—for its content and for its style. However, we now know that the style of a sentence *is* its content. Poet Marvin Bell reminds us that the content of a poem is not the same as a poem's contents, reminding us that when we paraphrase what a poem is about (its contents) we are not talking about the poem itself (its content or meaning), losing sight of what it does to us as we read it. The same is true of sentences. Or, to put this another way, the informational or propositional content of a sentence is not the same as the sentence's meaning, since sentences don't just carry information, like putting objects in a canister, but do things with it and to it, shaping it to particular purposes and effects. In this important sense, sentences work like verbs, doing things, taking action, rather than like nouns that only name.

We will learn how what is generally referred to as a sentence's style results from the strategies it employs for combining its underlying ideas or propositions. Accordingly, our goal will be to learn everything we can about the way sentences combine ideas. Understanding how sentences put ideas together is the first step in understanding how they do things, the ways in which they work, the ways they present information, and the ways they unfold their meanings—and to learn how to make them work for us. We will do this by studying the ways in which sentences combine information by coordinating it, subordinating it, or subsuming it in modification. We will look at the difference between sentences that combine information through loose syntax and those that do so through periodic syntax, focusing on the generative or heuristic power of cumulative sentences. Because our concern will be with how sentences work, the terms we will use will be rhetorical rather than grammatical, terms that help us understand how sentences move, how they take steps, speeding up and slowing down, how they make us feel, rather than terms that label the parts of a sentence much as we would label the parts of a dissected—and quite dead—frog. This means that we will study the sentence as a thing in motion, a thing alive, considering the strategies that give sentences pace and rhythm, particularly the duple rhythms of balance and three-beat rhythms of serial constructions.

In short, this course will reveal some of the syntactical strategies professional writers regularly employ. These are also strategies we can use in our writing to ensure that our sentences will be effective—and possibly even elegant. ■

A Sequence of Words

Lecture 1

Our goal will be to learn about how sentences work, what they do, how we can think and talk about them in ways that will help both our own writing and our understanding of prose style. Part of our concern will be with stretching our sense of options—all the things a sentence can be or do—and part with the notion of style itself.

This lecture will introduce a number of the assumptions upon which the entire course will rest. Using a sentence from Gertrude Stein, I will demonstrate how our understanding of sentences depends on much more than just knowing and stringing together the individual definitions of key concepts. This lecture will explore including the vertical ladder of abstraction into which each word in a sentence fits and the horizontal syntax of the sentence—the order in which its sequence of words appear. Most importantly, this lecture will introduce the underlying assumptions of this course—that the same words in different order have different meanings, that the way sentences convey information adds to and/or changes the information they convey, and that, consequently, there is no difference between the style of a sentence and its content.

This is a course that will run through all the ways sentences get longer—and shorter—and how control of these ways can improve our writing. Sentences are shaped by specific context and driven by specific purpose, so no rules or mechanical protocols can prepare us for the infinite number of tasks our sentences must accomplish. But there are a number of basic strategies or moves we can learn that can help make our sentences more effective, no matter what the task. This course will look closely and carefully at sentences from a number of different angles, starting with their underlying logic and moving through the reason why we cannot rigorously separate the form of a sentence from its content, its meaning from its style.

This course will also be devoted to understanding some of the secrets of prose style. Even though the nature of prose style has been a subject of heated debate for at least a couple of thousand years, we find ourselves today with

no clear definition of what we mean by style, and only the most subjective standards for judging when it is effective, much less elegant. Yet, somehow, we generally agree that there is something called prose style, we generally agree on a number of aspects of writing that seems to have something to do with it, and we generally agree that some writers are better at it than others.

This course looks closely and carefully at sentences, the most important building blocks of prose, the foundation of written communication, and always the essential units of prose style. The sentence is where we must start if we hope to understand why some writing captivates us and other writing leaves us unmoved. To be better writers we must first and foremost write better sentences. Whatever elegant and effective writing may be, the secret to achieving it has largely to do with first learning how to write elegant and effective sentences. This will be a course about how to make sentences longer; longer sentences, when carefully crafted and tightly controlled, are essential keys to elegant and effective writing.

The sentence is where we must start if we hope to understand why some writing captivates us and other writing leaves us unmoved.

Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure? The sequences of words we identify as sentences are capable of providing pleasure just as surely as they are capable of conveying crucial information. Sometimes the way sentences unfold their meaning is the most important meaning they offer. Let's start with that question from Gertrude Stein. What does this seemingly simple sequence of words actually *mean*? How does it actually work? What are some of the ways she could have gotten that meaning across with different sentences?

Sentences are sequences of words, but just adding words together does not create a sentence. A proposition, which is usually expressed in the form of a sentence, is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected. The relationship between propositions and sentences is a little hard to pin down, since a sentence will always advance or express one or more propositions and a proposition will always be in the form of a sentence. While many of us have been taught that a sentence is a sequence of words containing a subject

and a predicate that expresses an idea, most sentences express or imply a number of ideas. The basic unit of writing is the proposition, not the word or even a sequence of words, and we build sentences by putting propositions together. The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the propositions those words stand for or refer to. One of our first goals will be to understand how sentences combine propositions to present information, and how we can use our knowledge of the ways in which sentences put propositions together to present our own ideas more effectively.

Each sentence we write reflects three main kinds of choices we make: (1) what to write about and what we want to accomplish by writing about it, (2) which words to use, and (3) what order to put them in. There's not much any writing teacher can do in this course to help you choose your subject matter or propositional content, or decide what you want your writing to do. I can address some important things you'll want to keep in mind as you choose the words you use: *Paradigmatic* choices affect the degree of precision in your vocabulary choices; *syntagmatic* choices affect the way you put together the words you choose that is, the syntax.

Now that we've identified the three main factors that determine the style and effectiveness of our writing—propositional content, word choice, and syntax—let's go back to our sentence from Gertrude Stein to see the most important assumption underlying this course—that the same words in different order have different meanings. Or, to put this another way, style is content. Most of us have been taught to think of style and meaning or form and content as two different things. We think of content as the ideas or information our writing conveys. We think of style as the way in which we present those ideas. Many aphorisms and metaphors have been used to describe style, ranging from “Style is the man himself” to “Style is the dress of thought.” If we have to use a metaphor to explain style, we might think of an onion, which consists of numerous layers of onion we can peel away until there is nothing left—the onion is its layers, and those layers don't contain a core of onionness but are themselves the onion.

Similarly, the way we choose to order a sentence's propositional content subtly affects that content so that the meaning changes ever so slightly with every vocabulary and syntactical choice we make. The summarizable and paraphrasable information conveyed in our sentences is only a part of what sentences mean since what they do to a reader—the way they direct a reader's thinking and unfold information—may be as important or more important than the information they contain.

Understanding how sentences put propositions together is the first step in understanding how they do things and how to make them work for us. We will study the ways in which sentences combine information, by coordinating it, by subordinating it, or by subsuming it in modification. We will look at the differences between sentences that combine information through *loose* syntax, that put the subject and the verb near the beginning of the sentence, and those that do so through *periodic* syntax, delaying the unfolding of the sentence's most important news until the end of the sentence, creating a sense of suspense that demands the reader's attention, sometimes to the last word. We will pay particular attention to the cumulative sentence, a special kind of loose syntax that can also function suspensively and offers powerful generative or heuristic advantages to the writer who understands its form. We will study the sentence as a thing in motion, considering the strategies writers can use to give sentences pace and rhythm. This course will reveal some of the syntactical strategies professional writers regularly employ, strategies we can use in our own writing to ensure that our sentences will be effective, and possibly even elegant. ■

Question to Consider

1. Find five sentences of varying lengths that definitely give you pleasure. Break each one down into propositions and see how many propositions each one yields.

Grammar and Rhetoric

Lecture 2

Sentences are alive. We experience them in time, and we react to their unfolding as they twist and turn, challenging us, teasing us, surprising us, and sometimes boring or confusing us as we read them.

This lecture will examine some of the key terms we will be using as we talk about sentences: *effectiveness*, *elegance*, *grammar*, and *rhetoric*. Effectiveness will be explained in terms of situational appropriateness and informational density, the assumption being that unless the situation demands otherwise, sentences that convey more information are more effective than those that convey less. Elegance will be explained in terms of the mathematical concept of the elegant solution, with the important difference that we frequently gain precision in language by adding words rather than by subtracting. I will explain the difference between grammatical and rhetorical terminology, offering a brief grammatical overview of sentences and then contrasting it with a rhetorical view. This course will focus on grammatical issues only insofar as they are helpful in explaining rhetorical concerns, meaning our concern will always be with how sentences work rather than with how to label their constituent parts.

John Steinbeck, in his introduction to *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, points out the difference between the “subjective relational reality” we might have with a living fish and the technical, objective way we might need to categorize or specifically identify the fish. This point seems to me to apply equally to sentences. Most of the terms we use to identify sentences or to label their parts treat the sentence as something dead, to be dissected, its parts identified. Sentences are alive, we experience them in time, and we react to how they unfold as we read them.

I want to start by looking at the term “elegant and effective writing.” Both these modifiers have everything to do with what Steinbeck was talking about when he described the relational reality someone might have with a living fish. Both effectiveness and elegance remain largely a matter of personal taste. So let me tell you what I mean by those terms.

Effective writing anticipates, shapes, and satisfies a reader's need for information. Unless the situation demands otherwise, sentences that convey more information are generally more effective than those that convey less. Sentences that bring ideas and images into clearer focus by adding more useful details and explanations are generally more effective than those that are less clearly focused and offer fewer details. Many of us have been taught over the years that effective writing is simple and direct, a term generally associated with Strunk and White's legendary guidebook, *The Elements of Style*. Strunk and White do a great job of reminding us to avoid needless words but don't begin to consider all of the ways in which more words might be needed. My goal will be to explain why in many cases we actually need to add words to improve our writing. Effective writing is largely determined by how well the writer's efforts respond to the situation that occasioned the writing, to the writer's purpose in writing, and to the reader's needs.

Most of us can agree on whether writing is effective or not. Elegant writing is much harder for us to agree upon. Strunk and White's guidebook and other guidebooks imply that elegant writing is gaudy writing, overly lush, opulent, and mannered—and therefore to be avoided. H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* warns against “elegant variation” in prose style, which he characterized as the tendency of second-rate writers to concentrate more on “expressing themselves prettily” than on “conveying meaning clearly.” I'm referring to elegant prose style in the same way that mathematicians refer to the elegant solution to a math problem. In math, elegant solutions are the most direct route to solving a problem, taking the fewest number of steps. In writing, elegance is indeed a matter of efficiency, but the problems a writer attempts to solve have an emotional or affective dimension not generally associated with mathematics.

**One term I ought to mention
is *style*, a concept so rich,
so expansive, so subjective,
and so contested that any
attempt to define it immediately
encounters resistance.**

The final two terms I want to discuss in this lecture, *grammatical* and *rhetorical*, are easier to define than are *effective* and *elegant*, and more important. Grammatical descriptions of the sentence are primarily concerned with identifying its parts. Rhetorical descriptions of the sentence are primarily concerned with identifying the relational reality established when a reader reads or hears it. Grammar has to do with classifying words by their function in a sentence. It deals with the rules underlying our understanding and use of language. Most of us recognize and use these phenomena every day, though few of us keep in mind all the definitions or rules. Nor do we need to. Grammar describes the machinery of the sentence, but doesn't teach us how to make the sentence go anywhere or do anything.

Through a history that no doubt dates from our earliest use of language, but that has been recorded from the 5th century B.C., rhetoric has been associated with persuasion. For my purposes, rhetoric has to do with motive and impact—the reasons why we use language to accomplish certain goals and the extent to which it accomplishes them. Rhetoric focuses on the producer of language—the speaker or writer—and on the receiver of language—the listener or reader. Rhetoric has to do with the purposes to which we put language and the consequences of our efforts. Rhetoric is about the best ways of getting and holding attention with language and shaping that attention to achieve particular outcomes.

Whenever possible, the terms I use in this course will refer to rhetorical phenomena rather than with grammatical phenomena. We have generated a lot of labels that are grammatical, such as categorizing sentences by the number and kinds of clauses they contain, leading us to describe sentences as simple, compound, or complex. But a simple sentence can create an incredibly complex reaction in a reader, and a complex sentence may have only a very simple impact. Accordingly, we will rely more on terms or labels that direct our attention to the ways in which sentences deliver their goods. Some of the terms we'll use are terms I made up simply because I couldn't find existing ones that directed our attention to the rhetorical phenomena I wanted to discuss. Effectiveness and elegance are both rhetorical issues; grammar alone can lead us to neither.

One term I ought to mention is *style*, a concept so rich, so expansive, so subjective, and so contested that any attempt to define it immediately encounters resistance. We may refer to the style of a period, the style of a literary form or genre, the style of a nation, the style of an individual writer, of a work by an individual writer, the style of a particular period in a writer's career, the style of a group or movement of writers, a period in a movement, and so on. The definition I use when I'm talking about sentences is: "Style is what the writer writes and/or what the reader reads." This definition refuses to distinguish style from content or meaning. As our course progresses I'll try to show why. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Pick the opening sentence from a newspaper or magazine article and rewrite it in a completely different style—try making it bare and spare, like Hemingway, or formal and ceremonious, or lushly descriptive, or more emotional.
2. What have your ideas about style been? Would thinking that style isn't a "garnish for the meat of prose" change the way you think about or approach the task of writing?

Propositions and Meaning

Lecture 3

Most of us have been taught that the base clause of a sentence, the sentence's subject and predicate, is responsible for advancing its most important proposition, and this is simply not the case. Propositions carry emotional or effective impact that has nothing to do with the grammatical expression or surface structure that advances that proposition in a sentence. It is only when we consider the emotional effect of the way we order and combine the propositions that underlie the sentences we speak or write that we can consider ourselves in control of our writing.

What we generally think of as the style of a sentence is largely a matter of the way in which its words represent and organize its underlying propositions. Rather than expressing a complete thought or idea or feeling, a sentence expresses a number of thoughts or ideas or feelings either stated or implied in the propositions that underlie and give rise to the surface structure of the sentence's words and syntax. In 17th-century France, the Port Royal Grammarians illustrated this concept with the sentence "Invisible God created the visible world." A sentence's underlying propositions may actually trump or override the grammatical and syntactic cues of its surface language.

In 1926 H. W. Fowler, the legendary English lexicographer and philologist, complained that "proposition" was a "jack-of-all-trades" word that had come to be used in so many different ways that it really had no meaning. What so bothered Fowler was that this term, so clearly tied to propounding or setting forth an idea in philosophy, had come to be used to refer to commercial proposals, tasks, jobs, problems, occupation, trade, opponent, prospect, enterprise worth undertaking, area, field—and most galling of all, when used as a verb, to make an "amatory advance." In the study of logic, a proposition is a statement in which the subject is affirmed or denied by the predicate. As far as possible, I like to think of a proposition as a kind of basic or elementary statement that can't easily be broken down into constituent propositions.

In 1966 Noam Chomsky famously made a 17th-century discussion of propositions by the Port-Royal Grammarians one of the central arguments for his theory of deep structure and transformational grammar. For my purposes, what matters in Chomsky's discussion is the example of the relation between a sentence and its underlying proposition—an example that he cites from *The Port-Royal Grammar*, published in 1660. The sentence Chomsky cites is “*Dieu invisible a créé le monde visible*,” or “Invisible God created the visible world.” *The Port-Royal Grammar* noted that this sentence actually advanced not just one, but three different propositions: that God is invisible, that God created the world, and that the world is visible. As Chomsky summed up this argument, there exists a deep structure, an unwritten or unspoken “underlying mental reality” (unwritten propositions) below the surface structure of the spoken or written form of the sentence. Chomsky concludes that “the deep structure consists of a system of propositions, and it does not receive a direct, point-by-point expression in the actual physical object (the sentence) that is produced. To form an actual sentence from such an underlying system of elementary propositions, we apply certain rules (in modern terms, grammatical transformations).”

The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine propositions.

The key here is to think of a sentence as being a visible piece of writing and the propositions it advances as assumptions and ideas not necessarily written out. The basic unit of writing sentences is the proposition, not the word or even a sequence of words. The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine propositions. The sentence rests upon a number of unstated, unwritten propositions that might have been implied or acknowledged by writing this sentence a number of different ways.

Let's see how the order in which underlying propositions are advanced by the written sentence can make a big difference in the way the sentence works. This is an important step for writers to take because they can take control of that order to better accomplish their purpose for the sentence.

When a sentence works like a mini-narrative, telling a kind of story that has a surprise ending, I think it will almost always catch a reader's attention and remind the reader of the creative mind that crafted that sentence. The point here is not that the end of the sentence is where we should place the word or words we most want to emphasize, but that the power of underlying propositions is not tied to the traditional way we look at sentences.

Most of us have been taught that the base clause of a sentence is responsible for advancing its most important proposition, and this is simply not the case. Only when we consider the emotional effect of the way we order and combine the propositions that underlie the sentences we speak or write can we consider ourselves in control of our writing. An example from Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* can suggest the way underlying propositions may actually carry more weight or have a greater impact on the reception of a sentence than does its surface. Richard Ohmann, in an article, "Literature as Sentences," published in *College English* in 1966, made the case that "most sentences directly and obliquely put more linguistic apparatus into operation than is readily apparent." He illustrates his argument with the striking final sentence of *The Secret Sharer*:

Walking to the taffrail, I was in time to make out, on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the very gateway of Erebus—yes, I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny.

Ohmann refers to the propositional underpinning of this sentence as one of "extraordinary density," and density is one of the writing values I will argue for in this course. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Choose a long, fairly complicated sentence: You can find these in technical articles, academic research articles, legal documents, or a 17th-century poem. (If the sentence is in verse form, simply ignore the line breaks). Identify the base clause in the sentence and count the number of modifiers attached to it.
2. Write a sentence that, using cumulative syntax and adding as much detail as you can stand, describes a dramatic situation. Identify the base clause of the sentence. Move the base clause three times and observe how you like each new placement.

How Sentences Grow

Lecture 4

A kernel sentence is one of those multitasking terms we can't seem to avoid when talking about sentence style, a term that can refer to quite different sentences, depending on the situation of their use.

Sentence growth starts with what we'll call a *kernel sentence*, the initial building block to which we will add information. A kernel sentence may consist of a single word—such as General McAuliffe's answer of “Nuts!” to the German demand that he surrender during the Battle of the Bulge. The kernel sentence is simply about as short as it can be, and each proposition we add to it seems to turn the sentence in a new direction. The sentence may take several turns before it becomes clear what it is trying to do.

In yet another situation, the kernel sentence gives us more propositional information and follows the common sentence pattern of providing a subject, a verb, and an object. It is this second sense of the term *kernel sentence* that we will face most frequently as we improve our writing. The kernel sentence serves as an invitation for more propositional content, implying questions about the subject, the verb, or the object; when we answer any of those implicit questions by adding information to the sentence, we will make it more effective.

Another situation exists at the opposite end of the continuum from those irreducibly short kernel sentences. This last situation is most frequently faced by writers who hope to improve their sentences. This is the situation of almost any sentence of almost any length or complexity. This sentence may already advance a number of propositions, but it advances propositions to which we can still add useful detail or clarification. Most of the sentences we write aren't actually that long or that complicated; most can be improved by adding propositions that help explain the sentence or by adding details that clarify information it advances—as long as the additions we make are helpful, logical, and easy to follow. Even a longish sentence can become a

kernel sentence if we use it as the starting point for an even longer sentence that advances more propositions.

Kernel sentences can themselves create a writing style. Kernel sentences that simply posit information without detail or explanation offer the most basic form of predication. These sentences state something and then leave it to subsequent sentences to add information, if information is ever to be added. This is macho-speak that bluntly posits information without reflecting upon it or elaborating on it, and we find it exactly where we might expect it, as in the opening to David Morrell's 1972 novel *First Blood*. We refer to these short, simple sentences and simple compound sentences as *predicative* and they are characteristic of the style Walker Gibson calls "tough," a style frequently associated with some of Ernest Hemingway's best-known fiction. This style is effective when creating characters who act, but don't think much about what they do. Needless to say, the highly predicative style is not one I'll be advocating for effective writing—unless you want to write tough-guy narratives. I'm much more concerned with how we move beyond a highly predicative style than I am with offering it as a goal.

Once we have a kernel sentence—of any length—there are three basic approaches we can take to building it. We can add propositional information simply by using conjunctions or other connective words, like adding boxcars to a train. Sentences we build using this strategy simply add information. We can call this strategy *connective*. We can add propositional information by subordinating some parts of the sentence to other parts. We can call this strategy *subordinative*. We can add propositional information by using modifying words and phrases that turn underlying propositions into modifiers. We can call this strategy *adjectival*. Most of my emphasis in this course will be on learning to use adjectival strategies to write more effectively, but it's important to remember that this strategy is just one of three.

Even a longish sentence can become a kernel sentence if we use it as the starting point for an even longer sentence that advances more propositions.

The pioneering poet and style theorist Josephine Miles gave a lot of thought to the way in which we might think of sentences as a series of steps. In her 1967 book *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry*, Miles wrote: “Prose proceeds forward in time by steps less closely measured, but not less propelling, than the steps of verse.” Poetry, Miles explains, calls attention to its movement by meter, by line stops, by sentences, by rhyme schemes, and by stanzas, while prose measures its unfolding in ways much less obvious, but no less certain. She offers as an example the following sentence: “Early in the morning, in a small town, near the highway, because he was hungry and though he was in danger, the young boy, looking neither to [the] left nor to [the] right, climbed the path to the city hall.”

Analyzing the way the sentence moves forward, Miles notes that “if the qualifiers and connectives in this sentence are transferred back to their root predications, we would read: “The time was early. The time was morning. The place was a town. The town was small. The town was near the highway. The boy was young. The boy was hungry. The boy was in danger. The boy did not look to the left. The boy did not look to the right. The boy climbed the path. The path belonged to the city hall.” Miles explains what she’s doing by referring to the celebrated sentence from the Port-Royal Grammarians: “Invisible God created the visible world.” What results from her unpacking of the propositions is a highly predicative version.

At the other extreme, she shows what might happen if the phrases and clauses were to be reduced to qualifiers, resulting in a highly adjectival style. “Early this morning in a small highway town, hungry and in danger, the young boy, looking neither left nor right, climbed the city-hall path.” Miles characterizes the version of this sentence we started with as a mixture of connective and subordinative strategies. Accordingly, she suggests that we can think of prose as having three primary modes of progression—three primary ways in which it takes its steps: the predicative, the connective-subordinative, and the adjectival. I’ve slightly modified her overview by calling the predicative style the starting point from which we build longer sentences, choosing among and/or mixing three strategies: the connective, the subordinative, or the adjectival. What I want to take away from Miles’s approach to sentence style is simply the idea that the sentence unfolds in time by taking steps, and that these steps fall into three categories of added propositional information.

In future lectures, I'll focus on the particular types of steps the cumulative sentence takes, and try to make my case for the advantages it offers the writer. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Generate a single-step or kernel sentence, and then generate three more single-step or kernel sentences that add information to your original sentence. That will give you four predicative sentences. Your task is to join these four kernel sentences in as many ways possible within the framework of our broad categories of Connective, Subordinative, and Adjectival modes of progression.
2. Find a cumulative sentence in a story or essay. Treat it as a kernel sentence by adding more modifiers to it.

Example: Kernel—My shoes are Nikes. Additions—My Nikes are designed for playing tennis. My Nikes have air soles. I like their weight.

Example: Breakfast is my favorite meal. Additions—I like hot food for breakfast. I prefer eggs and bacon to oatmeal. A good breakfast always starts my day off right.

Adjectival Steps

Lecture 5

Sentences so clotted up by bound modifiers with embedded prepositional phrases and relative clauses are really beyond help. These are sentences not even a mother could love, and the only real way to improve them is to start over, trying to figure a relatively short base clause at the heart of each, and then ways of expanding and explaining that base clause with modifying phrases.

This lecture will make the case for choosing adjectival steps to increase the informational efficiency and effectiveness of our sentences. One of the most efficient moves we can make in writing sentences is to boil down subordinate clauses to single modifying words, shifting the sentence from a subordinate to an adjectival pattern. In this way “The boy who was hungry sat down at the table” can be boiled down to “The hungry boy sat down at the table.” Generally speaking, the more we can reduce the incidence of subordinate clauses introduced by pronouns such as *who*, *that*, or *which*, the more we minimize possible confusion or uncertainty about the noun that that pronoun refers to, and in doing this we buy ourselves the opportunity to add useful information to the sentence without as much risk that the sentence will become hard to follow. Not all propositions can be effectively boiled down to single modifying words or short modifying phrases, but many can, and this boiling down process allows us to pack more information into each sentence, much like chefs boil down cooking liquids to create more taste-packed reductions.

An assumption exists that long sentences are bad, but it is usually the case that bad sentences are long. What’s usually bad about a long sentence is not its length, but its logic—or lack thereof. There must be over half a million webpages that focus on long sentences in writing, almost all of which share the general view that long sentences are bad. There’s even a poem titled “The Very Long Sentence” which rambles on for some 412 words.

Something about long sentences seems to catch our attention, and writers are being warned to avoid them. But that advice doesn't make sense. If stylistic theory doesn't agree on much else, it agrees that sentence length is simply not a very useful index to style. The length of a sentence doesn't take into account the relative complexity or sophistication or even the length of the words that make up that sentence, and vocabulary choices could make a huge difference in the sentence's readability or effectiveness. Moreover, to think in terms of the average length of a sentence is sheer madness. Stylistic theory says that writers should vary the length of their sentences, avoiding long strings of short sentences, just as surely as they might want to avoid long strings of long sentences.

An assumption exists that long sentences are bad, but it is usually the case that bad sentences are long.

Now that I've made several strong claims about sentence length, let me offer a few examples to support those claims. Ask anyone who has read much Hemingway whether his sentences were characteristically long or characteristically short, and the odds are they'll choose short. But consider this sentence from *Death in the Afternoon*:

Once I remember Gertrude Stein talking of bullfights spoke of her admiration for Joselito and showed me some pictures of him in the ring and of herself and Alice Toklas sitting in the first row of the wooden barreras at the bull ring at Valencia with Joselito and his brother Gallo below, and I had just come from the Near East, where the Greeks broke the legs of their baggage and transport animals and drove and shoved them off the quay into the shallow water when they abandoned the city of Smyrna, and I remember saying that I did not like the bullfights because of the poor horses.

My point is that Hemingway wrote tons of long sentences. It may be precisely those long sentences he wrote that make us remember the short ones. What has given long sentences such a bad rep is not their length, but their over-reliance on bound modifiers rather than on the free modifiers used so effectively by Hemingway.

Virginia Tufte calls attention to this problem in her study *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, offering examples of sentences that rely too heavily on bound modifiers in prepositional phrases and long noun phrases. As Tufte explains, these sentences are bad “mostly because of what goes into them, not because of how much there is.” We can make sentences like these a little easier to read by trying to rethink them as a short sentence followed by modifying information. Rewriting these sentences to get as much of their information into free modifying phrases that follow a relatively simple base clause makes it much more clear when each sentence takes a step forward.

So the first step in writing long sentences is to start from a relatively short and simple base clause and then build the longer sentence around it. The second step is to remember that almost any relative clause can be boiled down to a modifying phrase that, if not shorter, is easier to follow than a series of clauses calling our attention to information tied to *that* or to *who* or to *whom* or to *which*.

The beauty of free modifiers is that they can be placed at the beginning of a sentence or in the middle of a sentence just as well as at its end, the only requirement is that the placement make sense by being close enough to what it modifies so as to preclude confusion. While it is not important that we make our sentences shorter, it is important that we make their constituent elements or steps as short as possible whenever doing so doesn't conflict with some other goal. Generally speaking, turning relative clauses into modifying words and phrases and then stringing these modifiers together around a base clause will allow us to write longer sentences that are more effective, because their length results from detail and explanation that adds propositional content. This satisfies the reader's desire to learn and gratifies the reader's confidence that he or she is in the good hands of a thoughtful writer. ■

Questions to Consider

1. How many free modifiers can you find in this sentence?

The room was fragrant with the smell of punch, a tumbler of which grateful compound stood upon a small round table, convenient to the hand of Mr. Mould; so deftly mixed that as his eye looked down into the cool transparent drink, another eye, peering brightly from behind the crisp lemon-peel, looked up at him, and twinkled like a star.

—Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

2. Find three bound modifiers in this sentence.

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

—William Wordsworth, “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.”

The Rhythm of Cumulative Syntax

Lecture 6

Work with cumulative sentences and soon their rhythms become seductive, urging us to keep adding modifying phrases, their very sound reminding us of the limitless detail and explanation we can add to each sentence we write.

The cumulative syntax, first codified and best explained by Francis Christensen, adds information to an initial base clause in unbound or free modifying phrases, all of which point back to, expand, and add to information presented in the base clause. The cumulative sentence is a form of a loose sentence, as opposed to periodic sentences that delay completion of their meaning until the end of the sentence. Cumulative sentences are easy to write, a process of adding modifying phrases to the base clause of the sentence, each phrase adding to our understanding or sharpening our visualization of the preceding phrase or of the base clause, taking us through increasingly specific sentence levels, each level another step for the sentence. Cumulative sentences lend themselves to numerous writing moves that almost guarantee our writing will become more effective, and subsequent lectures will explore a number of those moves. This is not to say that cumulative sentences are better than other sentences, nor is it to claim that what they accomplish can only be accomplished by this syntax, but it is to claim that the cumulative syntax gives us a kind of Swiss Army knife for our writing, a multipurpose tool that can be useful in a wide range of situations.

I've been peppering the preceding lectures with references to cumulative sentences and with examples of what they can do. If I haven't managed to establish the form these sentences take, I have managed to alert your ears to their characteristic rhythms. The examples we've seen contain rhythms within rhythms, setting up parallels and repetitions, balancing sound against sound, the product not of conscious choice so much as it is the natural benefit of the cumulative syntax, itself a rhythm so powerful that it encourages us to find other rhythms within it. After a while you can almost hear these rhythms coming, knowing that a free modifying phrase starting with a participle,

usually an *-ing* form of a verb, might come next, or an adverb such as a *-ly* word, or a phrase started with a possessive pronoun—*his*, *her*, or *its*, or a phrase that backtracks, picking up and repeating a word from the base clause before adding new information. In this way, we get cumulative rhythms such as: The chef prepared the fish, carefully, stuffing it with wild rice, sautéing it briefly, its sweet aroma blending smoothly with the other enticing odors in the kitchen, the fish becoming more than a food item, ascending to the status of art.

That we now know so much about cumulative syntax is a tribute to the pioneering work of Francis Christensen, an English professor at the University of Southern California, who in the 1960s stopped repeating received truths about what made for good writing and actually started looking at the way professional writers wrote. Much of his influence can be traced back to a single essay, “A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence,” first published in *College Composition and Communication* in 1962, and then republished in Christensen’s collection of essays *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: 6 Essays for Teachers* in 1967. What so distinguished Christensen’s approach to teaching writing was first the belief that writing should really matter and second, that writing improves most obviously and most quickly when we add information to our sentences in free modifiers following or surrounding a base clause. Christensen saw sentences as a means to a crucial end more important than clarity or effectiveness. His second, or more instrumental, belief was that traditional writing instruction had missed the point by advocating the subordinate clause and the complex sentence, and that “we should concentrate instead on the sentence modifiers, or free modifiers.” Equally important to his approach to teaching writing was his concern with its sound; he noted that “the rhythm of good modern prose comes about equally from the multiple-tracking of coordinate constructions and the downshifting and backtracking of free modifiers.”

**What makes me
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Christensen seems to have found inspiration for his approach to the cumulative sentence in a little-known essay by novelist and educator John Erskine. In 1946 Erskine had contributed an essay, “The Craft of Writing,”

to a collection of essays titled *Twentieth Century English*, edited by William S. Knickerbocker. Neither Erskine's essay nor the collection in which it appeared is remembered much today, but in his essay Erskine struck a note that served as the foundation for Christenson's theory of the cumulative sentence. Erskine noted that while grammar concedes that "speech is a process of addition," grammar then confuses things by making it seem that the substantive (i.e., nouns), since it can stand alone, is more important than the adjective; that the verb is more important than the adverb; that the main clause is more important than the subordinate. Erskine maintained that the modifiers were "the essential part of any sentence," and explained, "In practice, therefore, the sentence proceeds from something the reader may be expected to know already toward that ever new thing we wish to tell him. We proceed by addition."

From Erskine's observation about the importance of adding information through the use of modifiers, Christensen developed four principles for understanding and developing cumulative sentences. The first principle is that composition is essentially a process of addition. The second principle is that the information we add to sentences in modifying phrases gives the sentence a direction of modification or a direction of movement. This principle of direction of modification has sometimes been suggested by others who use the term *left-branching sentence* to describe modification that comes to the left of or before the main clause, or *right-branching sentence* to describe modification that comes to the right or after the main clause. In the left-branching sentence, the movement of modification is forward; in the right-branching sentence the movement of modification is backward.

The third principle is that cumulative sentences tend to develop by downshifting through increasingly detailed or specific levels of generality or levels of abstraction. Christensen's fourth principle is that cumulative sentences add texture to the propositional content of a sentence. Greater texture or density of information is one of the most important keys to better writing. The plain style that has been the goal of so much writing instruction is a style that devalues texture in favor of simplicity.

And there you have it—a generative rhetoric of the cumulative sentence based on just four principles: addition, movement, levels of generality, and texture. Consider the cumulative syntax in the terms of the steps suggested by Josephine Miles, and we get the idea of a sentence that takes a new step with each new modifying phrase we add, that adds a new level or degree of specificity with each of these steps. What makes me such a fan of the cumulative syntax is that this goal can be achieved so easily, just by practicing the basic moves of the cumulative sentence until we internalize its rhythms and start to produce them without thinking. In the next two or three lectures, I'll be focusing specifically on those rhythms. ■

Questions to Consider

1. “The end is to enhance life—to give the self (the soul) body by wedding it to the world, to give the world life by wedding it to the self. Or, more simply, to teach to see, for that, as Conrad maintained, is everything.”

—Francis Christensen.

How might writing better help a person to see better? Or, to put it another way, which comes first: seeing as a writer, or writing?

2. Write a cumulative sentence that adds increasing specificity of detail to the subject or to the verb of the base clause, or to the base clause itself, with free modifiers, and has a surprise ending.

Direction of Modification

Lecture 7

In this and subsequent lectures, I'll continue to try to point out the many reasons why I think cumulative syntax is the greatest thing since sliced bread, and the surest way for writers to immediately improve the effectiveness of their sentences.

While the cumulative form celebrated by Francis Christensen focused on modifying phrases added at the end of base clauses, cumulative sentences can also employ modifying words and phrases before the base clause or in the middle of the base clause. Each placement changes the meaning of the sentence and changes the way the sentence works. In this way, the cumulative modifying phrases may open, close, or appear in the middle of the sentence. For example, given *boy* as the object of modification and *crying loudly* as the modifying phrase, we might construct a sentence with that phrase in the initial slot (Crying loudly, the boy left.), the final slot (The boy left, crying loudly.), or the medial slot (The boy, crying loudly, left). This lecture will explore the rhetorical implications of each of these placement options.

In the last lecture I outlined what I believe are the broad advantages of cumulative syntax:

- Focusing on the clarity of logical relations this syntax establishes among parts of sentences.
- Focusing on the ebb-and-flow rhythms it promotes, almost guaranteeing that cumulative syntax will appeal to the ear.
- Perhaps most importantly, I showed how the cumulative syntax functions heuristically, prompting writers to make sentences more satisfying and effective by adding detail and explanation in free modifying phrases.
- Each new modifying phrase answers a question that a reader might have about the preceding clause or phrase.

I will need to review some grammar to help us distinguish cumulative sentences from those that are not cumulative. A cumulative sentence gets its name from the fact that it accumulates information, gathering new details as it goes. A cumulative sentence has two main parts: The first part, the base clause, contains the sentence's main subject and main verb. The second part of a cumulative sentence consists of one or more modifying phrases. Unlike a clause, a phrase does not contain a subject and a verb, and can't stand alone as a sentence. Most modifying phrases can be classified as participial phrases, gerund phrases, infinitive phrases, or prepositional phrases. Cumulative sentences frequently contain participial phrases or prepositional phrases that contain participles.

The crucial point here is that these contain verbals and not active or passive verbs. We might think of verbals as “verbs lite,” or as verbs drained of their power to make anything happen. A phrase may contain a verb form—a participle—that actually works like a modifying adjective or adverb, to modify nouns or pronouns. Modifying phrases may add information about the subject or the verb of the main clause (or the object, if it contains an object), or they may simply add to our understanding of the entire clause. The distinction between a clause and a phrase is crucial to understanding the cumulative sentence; students trying to write cumulatives for the first time often produce comma splices.

Unlike a clause, a phrase does not contain a subject and a verb, and can't stand alone as a sentence.

The cumulative sentence might be thought of as a major kind of adjectival sentence (to use the term suggested by Josephine Miles). The main feature of this sentence pattern is that it packages modifiers as unbound words or phrases—in ways that usually allow them to appear in the sentences in different positions, rather than bound to the words they modify. Modifying phrases may open, close, or appear in the middle of the sentence. Some writing scholars, such as Virginia Tufte, describe the positioning of modifying phrases as left-branching (before the base clause) or right-branching (after the base clause). I prefer to use Francis Christensen's original terms: *initial*, *medial*, or *final*. Free modifiers are free to be moved around, and they are also free to be mixed and matched.

Cumulative sentences featuring modifying phrases in the initial or medial positions carry a couple of risks. Initial modifying phrases run the risk of being misplaced modifiers, when the modifying phrase doesn't match up with what it tells about. The classic example is "Having eaten lunch, the bus left the station." The problem is that the modifying phrase doesn't really have a logical object of modification in the base clause: People eat lunch; buses don't. The sentence fails to provide logical agents who could be modified by the phrase "having eaten lunch." To call this modifier misplaced suggests that the sentence can be corrected by moving the modifying phrase to the correct place in the sentence, but no such place exists. The problem with this sentence is not placement of the modifying phrase, but that there's nothing for that phrase to modify.

To clean this sentence up, we would need to add a word or phrase to the base clause that would provide an object of modification—or that might provide something that the modifying phrase can answer a question about—in this case, "Who ate lunch?" So-called misplaced modifiers can occur anywhere in the sentence, but for some reason I don't understand, starting a sentence with an initial modifying phrase seems to lead writers to make this mistake. So whenever you begin a sentence with a modifying phrase, be sure that the base clause contains a word or words that the phrase can logically modify, and if possible, put it as close to the start of the base clause as possible.

There's also a risk we need to be aware of when we put modifying phrases in the medial position, between the subject of the base clause and its verb. If it's only a single modifying word or phrase, there's no problem, but if we start dumping modifying phrases in the middle of a base clause, we risk making the sentence hard to follow or transforming it into a suspensive sentence. When this happens, the sentence may be cumulative in a grammatical sense, but loses many of the sound and sense advantages of cumulative syntax.

The cumulative sentence is most typical and probably appears most frequently with the modifying phrase or phrases in the final position, since the whole idea behind the cumulative sentence is that it quickly posits a somewhat stark or kernel-like base clause (subject and verb, or subject, verb, object), then presents much more information about that base clause

in subsequent modifying phrases. Accordingly, to give any sentence more of a cumulative form, simply replace its period with a comma and start adding modifying phrases. ■

Questions to Consider

Each of the following cumulative sentences is not quite as good as it could be. Some aren't even cumulative. For others, either the logic of the modifying scheme isn't completely clear, or the overlap with the preceding level isn't as insistent as it might be, or something just doesn't sound right when you read the sentence aloud. Figure out a way to improve each sentence by maximizing its cumulative potential.

1. The woman sang with a pitch that rang true and fire in her heart.
2. I caught a fish, hating the thought of eating it, she hated eating it too.
3. We caught the bus to go to the zoo on Sunday, shouting for the driver to stop, the driver with a look of annoyance.
4. He scrubbed the linoleum floor, his pants rolled up to his knees, a sombrero on his head, one his great uncle bestowed on him before running off with the circus.
5. The man looked at his wife, disappointed in her once again, the fifth time this month, at least the hundredth time this year.

Coordinate, Subordinate, and Mixed Patterns

Lecture 8

In coordinate patterns, all modifying phrases refer back to the base clause. In subordinate patterns, each modifying phrase refers to the immediately preceding clause or phrase, and we can mix these two patterns by adding subordinate levels to coordinate patterns, or coordinate levels to subordinate patterns, with one or the other pattern predominating.

This lecture will explain and discuss the rhetorical implications of the options available when we want to add more than one cumulative modifying phrase to a base clause. Cumulative phrases can be strung together, each new phrase adding or clarifying information about the base clause or about the immediately preceding modifying phrase. When we employ more than a single modifying phrase in a cumulative sentence, we can choose to combine them in patterns that are coordinate, subordinate, or mixed. In coordinate patterns, all modifying phrases refer to the base clause. In subordinate patterns, each modifying phrase refers to the preceding clause or phrase. And we can mix these two patterns by adding subordinate levels to coordinate patterns or coordinate levels to subordinate patterns, with one or the other pattern predominating.

We've seen that cumulative sentences can be described in terms of whether their free modifying phrases come at the beginning of the sentence—before the base clause—in the initial or left-branching position, in the medial position between the subject and verb of the base clause, at the end of the sentence—after the base clause—in the final or right-branching position, or some combination of the three positions. It may help to think of this aspect of cumulative form as being syntagmatic, a term we've previously applied to the way in which a sentence unfolds

**Subordinate levels
move the focus of the
sentence forward,
moving from general
to specific, zooming in
like a movie camera.**

its meaning horizontally, to the eye of the reader, from left to right. There is also what can be called a *paradigmatic* or *vertical aspect* of cumulative sentences. This aspect is conceptual or logical, rather than visual, as it focuses on the discursive relationship between and among cumulative free modifying phrases, irrespective of their placement. Or, to put this another way, the syntagmatic aspect or characteristic of cumulative sentences is strictly *formal*, determined by where a modifying phrase is placed, while the paradigmatic aspect is strictly *functional*, determined by what each modifying phrase does.

Each cumulative modifying phrase means that the sentence takes another step, but we need to realize that each step has two aspects or dimensions or purposes. Each step moves the sentence toward the period at its end, but each step also adds a new level of detail or explanation. Consider the sentence: “Having sold all of her boxes of cookies, the elated Girl Scout went home.” In syntagmatic terms, we would describe this cumulative sentence as having its modifying phrase (“Having sold all of her boxes of cookies”) in the initial or left-branching position. In *paradigmatic* terms, we would describe this cumulative level as having two *levels*, the first being the base clause, the second being its single modifying phrase.

Cumulative syntax also makes possible two other patterns of logical relationships among base clauses and modifying phrases. The three paradigmatic patterns of the cumulative sentence are called *coordinate*, *subordinate*, and *mixed*. In coordinate patterns, as you’ll remember from the previous example, all modifying phrases refer to the base clause.

- (1) The elated Girl Scout went home,
- (2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
- (2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
- (2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
- (2) so proud of her accomplishment she immediately wanted to get more cookies to sell.

In subordinate patterns, each modifying phrase refers to the preceding clause or phrase.

- (1) The elated Girl Scout went home,
- (2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
- (3) those inescapable icons of capitalism,
- (4) its methods and assumptions hardwiring our children to value the power of selling in almost their every activity,
- (5) methods and assumptions championed by some and resisted by others.

We can mix these two patterns by adding subordinate levels to coordinate patterns or coordinate levels to subordinate patterns, with one or the other predominating.

- (1) The elated Girl Scout went home
- (2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
- (2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
- (3) those inescapable icons of capitalism,
- (3) those irresistible sugar bombs,
- (2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
- (3) recognizing some who came to their doors as friends of her parents,
- (3) remembering some houses where she had gotten particularly wonderful Halloween treats,
- (4) figuring both categories of potential buyers would find it hard to say no to a cute little girl participating in one of America's best-established cultural rituals.

Coordinate levels can be thought of as modifying the entire base clause, or as focusing on one of its elements. Subordinate levels move the focus of the sentence forward, moving from general to specific, zooming in like a movie camera.

The main appeal and power of coordinate cumulative construction come from its distinctive rhythm and the very simple logical relations among the steps the sentence takes. It tends to be repetitive, both in sound and in sense. All the new information added by each coordinate level adds detail, helps explain the base clause, but never moves it forward. And yet, a coordinate sentence whose modifying phrases follow a sequence can seem to move, indeed can display what I think is the most seductive prose rhythm of cumulative form.

The main appeal of subordinate cumulative construction comes from its ability to advance the sentence into new territory, making it particularly effective when used to describe a process or to follow something that unfolds in time. Pure subordinate cumulative sentences, particularly those that develop through more than three levels, are difficult to find because the circumstances that call for such a pure construction are as rare as they are hard to imagine. Accordingly, most subordinate cumulative sentences are really just dominantly subordinate.

The main appeal of mixed cumulative construction is that it combines the strength of both the coordinate and subordinate forms, allowing the sentence to move forward in time and open up new ideas, while maintaining intensity and focus.

In this lecture I've tried to show how the steps cumulative sentences take—each modifying phrase a new step—fall into three main categories. We've looked at coordinate cumulative sentences where all the modifying phrases point back to the base clause, and any one of which makes sense if moved just before or just after the base clause. These coordinate cumulatives can be thought of as two-level sentences, with all of their second-level modifying phrases pointing back to the first level of the base clause. We've seen subordinate cumulative sentences where the modifying phrases are pretty much locked in place below or after the level of the sentence they modify, with modifying phrases after the second level each taking the phrase before it to a new level of information or explanation. And we've seen mixed cumulative sentences, where some modifying phrases follow the mixed pattern and follow the subordinate pattern.

Understanding the way each of these three cumulative patterns works makes it easier for us to write extended cumulative sentences. Understanding the concept of sentence levels can be very important, immediately giving writers reachable goals for improving their own writing. It may be a bit of an oversimplification, but generally speaking, one mark of inexperienced or ineffective writing is that it relies heavily on sentences of only one or two levels. Just adding one new level of information to our sentences means that our sentences will contain more information, more detail, and a better explanation. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Diagram this sentence, indicating levels of coordination and subordination:

He comes into a room with one of these documents in his hand, with the air of a schoolmaster and a quack doctor mixed, asks very kindly how you do, and on hearing you are still in an indifferent state of health owing to bad digestion, instantly turns round and observes that “All that will be remedied in his plan; that indeed he thinks too much attention has been paid to the mind, and not enough to the body; that in his system, which he has now perfected and which will shortly be generally adopted, he has provided effectually for both; that he has been long of opinion that the mind depends altogether on the physical organisation, and where the latter is neglected or disordered the former must languish and want its due vigour; that exercise is therefore a part of his system, with full liberty to develop every faculty of mind and body; that two Objections had been made to his *New View of Society*, viz. its want of relaxation from labour, and its want of variety; but the first of these, the too great restraint, he trusted he had already answered, for where the powers of mind and body were freely exercised and brought out, surely liberty must be allowed to exist in the highest degree; and as to the second, the monotony which would be produced by a regular and general plan of co-operation, he conceived he had proved in his *New View*

and *Addresses to the Higher Classes*, that the co-operation he had recommended was necessarily conducive to the most extensive improvement of the ideas and faculties, and where this was the case there must be the greatest possible variety instead of a want of it.

—William Hazlitt, “On People with One Idea.”

2. Write a subordinate cumulative sentence, in which there is a base clause and three modifying phrases, and in which each modifying phrase modifies something in the phrase that preceded it.

Coordinate Cumulative Sentences

Lecture 9

One of the great beauties of the cumulative sentence is that it always presents us with a number of different workarounds that will smooth over rough spots in the way the sentence sounds or in the logical relationships of its parts.

Coordinate levels can be thought of as modifying the entire base clause, or as focusing on one of its elements. Given a base clause containing a subject, a verb, and a direct object, the coordinate modifying levels may sharpen/focus on the whole clause, its subject, verb, or object. Coordinate levels keep the sentence running in place as more information is added to its load. It is helpful to diagram cumulative sentences in a way that reveals the relationship of multiple modifying phrases. Such a diagram assigns a (1) to the base clause, and then numbers subsequent phrases in terms of the level each modifies. Thus, the coordinate cumulative sentence “This room looks like a disaster area, its ratty carpet stained and worn thin in many spots, its sheetrock walls pocked with cracks and holes, its broken and splintered furniture good only for firewood” might be diagrammed as follows:

- (1) This room looks like a disaster area,
- (2) its ratty carpet stained and worn thin in many spots,
- (2) its sheetrock walls pocked with cracks and holes,
- (2) its broken and splintered furniture good only for firewood.

This lecture will be shorter on terms and descriptions and longer on considering the kinds of writing tasks that coordinate cumulative construction seems tailor-made for. It’s easier to write cumulative sentences if we understand their basic grammar and logical construction, but one of the beauties of this syntax is that we don’t have to think very much about their design once we become familiar with their distinctive rhythms. Probably the best and most useful advice I can give to anyone who wants to master writing cumulative sentences is this: Read them aloud. Your ear will detect problems or awkwardnesses or alert you to the need to add more information to your

sentence because the parts that sound “clunky” or go “bump” when you read them aloud almost always sound bad because the logic of the sentence needs tweaking. Our eyes are very forgiving, but our ears almost never let us down, alerting us to something that needs fixing, even if we can’t describe the problem.

Let’s consider some of the advantages of coordinate cumulative sentences. Coordinate cumulative sentences pile up a number of modifying phrases, all of which point back to or modify either the entire base clause or some part (or word) in the base clause. A cumulative sentence with only a single second level is more satisfying than would be the sentence without a second level, but a single cumulative modifying phrase only begins to tap the advantages of cumulative syntax. If a sentence only takes a single cumulative step, it can’t really be said to be either coordinate or subordinate, since we need at least two modifying phrases before we can make that determination. Accordingly, while a cumulative sentence with only a single modifying phrase does take the important step that gives the sentence a second level of meaning or texture, such a sentence does not plug into either the sound or logical advantages of longer, more pronounced cumulative sentences.

However, the coordinate cumulative sentence with two second-level modifying phrases, such as those we just saw from Carl Klaus, offers writers a number of opportunities for parallels and parallel rhythms, for insistent repetitions and backtracking overlaps, and allows writers to make clear their control of this important syntax. When writers take the next step, adding a third modifying phrase to their sentences, their prose becomes even more effective, their control of syntax even more impressive. One of the most effective moves writers can make in cumulative sentences with three or more modifying phrases is to make the final phrase either a kind of summation or make it a simile or metaphor that nails down or drives home the idea the preceding phrases build toward. Writing pure coordinate sentences in which there are only second-level modifying phrases, all modifying the base clause, is never

Probably the best and most useful advice I can give to anyone who wants to master writing cumulative sentences is this: Read them aloud.

a goal in itself, just a reminder that the intrinsic strength of the coordinate form is most pronounced when that pure form is achieved. Specific context is much more important than following any abstract blueprint for a particular syntactical pattern.

We might think of the coordinate cumulative sentence as establishing a sense of what Gertrude Stein called “the continuous present,” describing a process that we know must unfold in time, but presenting it as a series of components or constituent actions that are themselves free from time markers that would impose chronological order on them. In this way, coordinate cumulative sentences slow readers down, forcing them to pause as a process or action is broken down into discrete parts, the sentence lingering to deepen detail, going back to elaborate the base clause rather than moving on to completely new propositions. Without making too big a point of it here, I’d note that the coordinate form also lends itself to the description of rhythmic processes.

Now, before we move on in the next lecture to subordinate and mixed cumulative sentences, I need to offer one important reminder and one small caveat. The reminder is that while the examples of coordinate structure I’ve offered in this lecture have all been examples of right-branching sentences where the modifying phrases all come after the base clause, coordinate cumulatives can also be left-branching, where the modifying phrases come before the base clause, or mid-branching, where the modifying phrases interrupt the base clause, coming between its subject and its verb. The caveat is that not all coordinate modifying phrases work exactly in the way grammar tells us they can work. So-called free modifiers can be stuck in particular places by the needs of spatial, temporal, causal, and agential logic. Once more, we are reminded that the so-called rules of grammar should really be thought of as guidelines, some of them quite loose. The bottom line is that language is inherently rebellious, chafing against any authority that would attempt to limit what it can and cannot do. Finding these pressure points where the rules simply don’t work is part of what makes writing so much fun! ■

Questions to Consider

1. Write or find a sentence that you feel moves quickly through an action or a sequence of actions. Rewrite the content of the sentence, adding whatever modifying phrases you need to slow down the pace, to downshift the reader's attention. Possible ways to downshift: add detail, anticipate conflict or consequences and set up a dramatic scene, add introspection (by the narrator or by a character) or exploration of broader meaning.
2. Write a coordinate cumulative sentence in which the free modifiers have to be in a certain sequence but are still free.

Subordinate and Mixed Cumulatives

Lecture 10

One of the strengths of the coordinate cumulative form is that it suggests a writer who is very concerned with the reader, and who wants to give that reader a satisfying amount of information in a sentence form that makes a lot of information easy to process.

As we've discussed, subordinate levels move the focus of the sentence forward, moving from general to specific, zooming in like a movie camera. They can also break a whole into its constituent parts, accomplishing the same end as do some uses of the colon. Subordinate levels can also lead us into new thoughts, nudging us to be ever more specific, to refine and/or detail whatever we have just written. Thus: "He drove carefully, one hand on the wheel, the other hand holding a sandwich, a ham and cheese fossil, a strangely colored lump made three days before by his sister, a simple, trusting woman, someone who deserved a better life than fate had dealt her, a life of happiness if not of success, the basic happiness of feeling loved and needed." Mixed patterns obviously can tap both the repetitive, "running in place" emphasis of coordinate levels and the progressive potential of subordinate levels. Thus: "They drove carefully, he with hands on the wheel in the prescribed position at ten and two, his eyes riveted to the road, a road almost invisible beyond the sheets of rain that pelted the windshield, she checking and rechecking the map, calling out town names and possible landmarks, landmarks neither could possibly see, both growing more tense and worried by the minute, neither able to say anything."

As we saw in the last lecture, coordinate cumulative modifying phrases can be quite powerful, returning again and again to the base clause to add detail or explanation, offering a kind of "continuous present." One drawback of the coordinate form, however, is that it calls attention to itself through its pronounced repetitions and parallels to such an extent that writers must be careful not to rely too heavily on the form.

Fortunately, cumulative syntax provides us with almost unlimited patterns of modification, so we can avoid relying too heavily on any single pattern or rhythm. The coordinate cumulative form represents one extreme of the cumulative syntax, the extreme where the sentence seems to run in place, adding more detail to the propositional content of the base clause. The subordinate cumulative pattern represents the opposite extreme, where the sentence seems constantly moving forward, leaving the base clause behind. It moves the focus of the sentence forward, from general to specific. The identifying characteristic of a coordinate cumulative sentence is that any of its modifying phrases will make sense if placed directly before or after the base clause. The identifying characteristic of the subordinate cumulative sentence is that none of its modifying phrases after the second level will make sense if placed directly before or after the base clause.

In an earlier lecture, I pointed out that it's actually hard to find pure examples of subordinate cumulative sentences, where each new modifying phrase is a new level. Sentences that consist entirely of subordinate cumulative modifying phrases, particularly those that develop through more than three levels, are difficult to find in part because the circumstances that call for such a pure construction are as rare as they are hard to imagine. Once again I should stress that purity of syntactic form is rarely, if ever, something writers should be concerned with in real-life writing situations.

Writers will almost certainly rely more heavily on cumulative sentences that mix coordinate and subordinate modifying patterns. You may remember some of the mixed-form cumulative sentences we've seen in earlier lectures. There was the wonderful sentence by Loren Eiseley that clearly stresses the repetitions of the coordinate pattern over the forward motion of the subordinate. As is true of so many aspects of the cumulative sentence, we might not agree which rhythm or pattern dominates in any of these sentences, and we might not

As long as we understand the general principles of cumulative syntax, precise labeling or classification isn't necessary for writers to use the form effectively.

agree with the way a sentence is diagrammed. But I can't stress too strongly that disagreements like this are beside the point: They just don't matter! As long as we understand the general principles of cumulative syntax, precise labeling or classification isn't necessary for writers to use the form effectively.

Now it's time for us to make sure we understand all, or at least most, of the ways we can get the job done by adding cumulative modifying phrases to our sentences. Accordingly, I want to take a minute to review the basic patterns that a cumulative modifying phrase can take. Once again, while I'll offer a brief grammatical description of each pattern, you don't need to remember the grammatical terms if you recognize and remember the way each pattern sounds. Indeed, I strongly urge you *not* to worry about the grammatical descriptions, but simply to read these patterns aloud until they become familiar to you.

Here are the main possibilities for adding second-level modifying phrases to the base clause. These patterns will also work for adding subordinate levels to preceding phrases.

- Perhaps the easiest way to add a second level is to begin the modifying phrase with a verbal.
- A variation on this pattern is to begin the modifying level with a verbal plus another modifier (an adverb).
- You can begin the modifying phrase with an article plus one of the nouns (subject or object) from the base clause.
- You can begin the modifying phrase with an article plus an adjective plus one of the base clause nouns.
- You can begin the modifying phrase with an article plus an adjective plus almost any noun followed by a prepositional phrase.

- You can begin the modifying phrase with an article plus an appositive for one of the base clause nouns or a noun phrase appositive for the action of the clause.
- You can begin the modifying phrase with a possessive pronoun referring to either subject, object, or to the sense of the entire base clause.
- You can begin the modifying phrase with an adverb or an article plus an adverb.
- You can begin the modifying phrase with an article plus entirely new information, including even relative non sequiturs.
- You can begin the modifying phrase with almost anything followed by a simile or metaphor that details all or part of the base clause.

There are other patterns that modifying phrases can follow, but these are the most prevalent ones I can think of. I have my students repeat this exercise with a base clause of their own choosing simply to help them realize just how many different ways there are to write cumulative modifying phrases. My guess is that each of them will, consciously or unconsciously, gravitate toward using some of the above patterns much more frequently than others, but what is most important is that we remember not just how many patterns there are but that they can be combined in an almost infinite number of variations.

I ask my students to respond to the challenge of following structural prompts. Now, obviously an exercise such as this has no direct application to any real-world writing situation, but almost without fail, once my students realize they can control that much information using cumulative syntax and produce sentences that sound that good, they realize how easily they can produce similarly complex and rhythmic sentences of their own. Once my students make that discovery they usually become enthusiastic and impressive masters of cumulative syntax, giving themselves over to its seductive rhythms, logical strength, and generative magic. My hope is that their experience will become yours as well. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Choose a base clause. Modify it with base clauses following the ten patterns for adding second-level modifying phrases.
2. Finish the sentences below, making your own modifying phrases.

(1) Big Al headed back into the bar,

(2) a _____,

(2) his _____,

(3) _____,

(3) _____.

(1) They sat down at the table,

(2) he _____,

(3) his _____,

(3) his _____,

(2) she _____,

(3) her _____,

(3) her _____,

(2) the table _____,

(3) its _____,

(3) its _____,

(2) the overall scene suggesting _____.

Prompts of Comparison

Lecture 11

I'm going to throw you a wee bit of a curve in both of these lectures because technically, most of the sentence moves I'll be describing are not exactly cumulative. However, it ought to be clear by now that I'm much more interested in the way a sentence works, the way it does what it does, than in naming its parts or holding it to strict grammatical standards.

This will be the first of two lectures suggesting ways in which cumulative syntax can be employed to remind us of sentence moves that almost always improve our writing. Professional writers rely heavily on figurative language—similes and metaphors—to make their sentences at once more informative and more interesting; more informative by suggesting clarifying comparisons, more interesting by turning the sentence in a more vivid, engaging, or speculative direction. Similes and metaphors can pop up anywhere in our sentences, but we can prompt ourselves to make figurative language a constant attraction in our writing by adding *like*, *as if*, or *as though* to the end of a sentence and then completing that prompt by deciding on an effective comparison to complete the simile. Each of these prompts commits the sentence to taking another step, and the steps introduced by these words will add both information and imaginative appeal to the sentence.

This lecture will discuss the advantages of incorporating similes into cumulative sentences. The next lecture will focus on the advantages of using speculative phrases, usually beginning with words such as *because* or *possibly* or *perhaps*. Similes and metaphors both make comparisons, asking us to think of something in terms that may at first seem surprising. A simile explicitly compares two things of different kind or quality, usually introducing the comparison of two things of different kind or quality, but implying introducing the comparison with *like* or *as*. A metaphor is a kind of stealth simile, offering a comparison of two things of different kind or quality, but implying or assuming the comparison and not introducing it with *like* or *as*. Both similes and metaphors quickly and powerfully suggest comparisons

that might be impossible to explain in any literal way. Professional writers rely heavily on figurative language—similes and metaphors—to make their sentences at once more informative and more interesting, more informative

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by suggesting clarifying comparisons, more interesting by turning the sentence in a more vivid, engaging, or speculative direction.

In the past you may have encountered a writing teacher who warned you against relying heavily on similes and metaphors, apparently viewing these lively figures of speech as mere ornament, adding superficial flair but no important contribution. E. B. White, in the “List of Reminders” in “An Approach to Style” chapter, which he added to Professor Strunk’s advice in *The Elements of Style*, sounds a warning against the heavy use of similes: “The simile is a common device and a useful one, but similes coming in rapid fire, one right on top of another, are more distracting than illuminating. The reader needs time to catch his breath; he can’t be expected to compare everything with something else, and no relief in sight.” Now, I don’t know what kind of writers Mr. White was thinking of when he wrote this warning, but the last thing I worry about with my writing students today is that they might use too many similes, overwhelming their readers with a cascade of comparisons. I urge my students to think of the simile as an important way to forge an emotional link with their readers, giving readers a glimpse into the way the writer thinks, as opposed to just what the writer sees or reports.

I think that in most writing situations it is not just advantageous but is crucial that writers reveal their distinctive individuality—their personality as sound thinkers—through their writing. Accordingly, I try to get my students to see the importance of processing information rather than just presenting it. Cumulative syntax offers us great opportunities of writing with style.

- It gives us an effective way of organizing the information and opinion we present in our writing.
- It suggests to our readers that we take pains to keep the logical relationships clear among the propositions our sentences advance.

- It suggests to our readers that we are attuned to the rhythmic pleasures of language as well as to its utilitarian functions.
- It forges a kind of implicit contract with our readers in which they can be confident that we are doing our level best to communicate as fully and clearly with them as we possibly can.
- Cumulative syntax also gives us great opportunities to make even more distinctive similes a part of our writing practice.
- As a generative syntax, it offers us prompts, inviting us to use similes to sum up or look back on previous information or details from a new vantage point.

More importantly, when writers add a simile to their cumulative sentence, they give the sentence a distinctive touch, making a comparison that may be surprising, revealing something important, individualistic, and possibly unique about the way the writer's mind works.

Whatever we understand a writer's style to be, one key to the nature of that style is likely to be found in the writer's use of figurative language. Our use of figurative language is one of the acts of self-definition that goes into creating the style of our writing. Indeed, the distinctive cumulative rhythm particularly invites—and rewards—our use of similes. The cumulative syntax provides an armature on which we can almost always tack a simile. Of course, the simile doesn't have to come at the end of the sentence, but can be introduced before or after or in the middle of the base clause—as is true of free modifying phrases in general.

Thomas Pynchon incorporates similes into some of his characteristically cumulative sentences in his novel *Against the Day*. These sentences are noteworthy in a number of different ways. They are marked by insistent cumulative rhythms, even if they are not always punctuated in ways that emphasize their essentially cumulative structure. You can't miss their essential ambiguity; none of these sentences out of context makes it clear what's going on, but all suggest a kind of mysterious, numinous quality to the semblance of Pynchon's novel. Finally, while the similes he uses may

not be dramatic show-stoppers, they are arguably not comparisons any of us would have thought of, thus serving to reinforce the uniqueness of Pynchon's novelistic vision.

Pynchon frequently places his similes as the last of a number of sentence steps, using that final *as if* as a kind of summary comment on what has come before. He also uses the simile as a kind of hinge earlier in the sentence, a step which turns the sentence in a new direction, with subsequent cumulative modifying phrases pointing back to, elaborating, and/or explaining the simile itself. We can see something similar going on in Joyce Carol Oates's frequently anthologized creepy short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" She creates the mood of her story in part by using simile-clinched sentences.

Similes, while technically not always cumulative modifying phrases, can work exactly like the way cumulative modifying phrases work. Our writing benefits when we use similes (and metaphors) to reveal more about the way we think or feel about what we are writing. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Using this base clause anywhere it works best for you, write a sentence that adds narrative detail and concludes with an *as if* simile:

The music came from somewhere in the woods...

2. Using this base clause anywhere it works best for you, write a sentence that adds narrative detail and concludes with a speculative phrase that begins with *as if*.

Louise opened the window and looked down the street ...

Prompts of Explanation

Lecture 12

Writing is one of the most distinctly human activities, and ... like all human knowledge, it inherently, inevitably, and gloriously involves acts of interpretation.

Sentences are purpose-driven. We use them to get things done—to answer questions, to advance opinions, to explain ideas that are not clear, to show our thinking as we attempt to solve problems. Sometimes our sentence moves can help focus our attention on the value of pushing ourselves to explain more and to explain more effectively the information and propositions we advance in our writing. And heuristic prompts, syntactic challenges to add to and improve our explanations of ourselves and the world around us, can help us make our writing more effective. Three useful heuristic prompts are the words *because*, *perhaps*, and *possibly*. Each word can be used in many different ways and in many different places when we are writing, but, when added to the end of a base clause, each can challenge us to move beyond what we have written. We can add to or better account for what we have written in the base clause by adding a new clause introduced by the conjunction *because*. Or we can more tentatively suggest causes, motives, or explanations which we think likely but not certain with cumulative phrases introduced by *perhaps* or *possibly*.

The most effective prose establishes a relationship between writer and reader. If our writing doesn't offer some glimpses of writers as personalities, it's hard to say that it has a style, much less that its style will appeal to readers. If our writing displays no more of the way we think—the ways in which we process information—than does objective technology, it probably doesn't matter that what we write accurately records and reports information.

Our writing is purpose-driven, and almost always we have multiple purposes when we write. We write to accomplish a wide variety of goals, and very rarely is our primary goal only to record or report. We record and report in order to accomplish larger purposes, and those larger purposes shape the way in which we approach the task of recording and reporting, choosing

what to include, choosing what to exclude, organizing our presentation of information to best suit our purposes. One of the important purposes that we should always have when we write is, as Joan Didion so powerfully put it in her celebrated essay “On Keeping A Notebook”: “Remember what it was to be me.” If we scale down this large philosophical assumption to the level of

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the sentences we write, it suggests we should be concerned not just with the accuracy and clarity of what we write, but that we should also be concerned with making our writing a reflection of who we are, how we think, and what we value.

We signal that we are processing information in our writing in a number of ways, several of which we’ve already been exploring in this course. The cumulative syntax itself signals our determination to get it right—to extend the detail

and explanation in our writing further, to take one more crack at making as clear as possible what we are trying to communicate, using cumulative modifying phrases to sharpen our images and to better reveal our reasoning. The cumulative syntax can also prompt us to include similes and metaphors in our writing—particularly similes—that compare what we are writing about with something else, the comparison both offering another perspective on or way of thinking about our subject and offering a window into the way our own thinking works, a glimpse of our intellectual personality, our individuality—our style.

Now, I want to suggest another way in which the cumulative syntax can serve to prompt us to reveal more about our thinking, more about the characteristic ways in which we process information. One step beyond making the comparisons, as similes do, between two things or situations that are different, and sometimes quite different, is to speculate about that which is not known. We signal such speculation in lots of different ways, but I’ll focus on three of those signals: the words *because*, *possibly*, and *perhaps*. These words lend themselves to the step-logic and downshifting rhythms of the cumulative syntax. They also lend themselves to becoming generative challenges or heuristic prompts.

Adding speculation concerning motive behind, cause of, or interpretation of the events or actions we write about helps forge the connection between reader and writer as two minds at work. Knowing how easily we can add speculation to our writing may encourage us to put a bit more of the way we think into our writing. Here, of course, I'm thinking of writing situations where it is as important to present our judgment, our ability to interpret, our commitment to understanding as it is to present unprocessed information.

Linguistic theory tells us that the last or next-to-last step or slot in the sentence generally is the place in the sentence where we place the most intonational stress. As Martha Kolln explains in her chapter on sentence rhythm in her *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, this well-recognized rhythm pattern is called *end focus*, and it gives rhythmic emphasis to information at the end or near the end of the sentence. The truth is we can shape our sentences so that we can emphasize any part of them we want to—and that emphasis is rhetorical rather than grammatical, determined by the context and purpose of the sentence rather than by its grammatical form.

The point we need to remember is that position, by itself, may or may not place emphasis, but the end position does lend itself to emphasis. That's why, in this lecture, I'm suggesting the advantages of using the final step of a cumulative sentence for speculation about motive or likely consequences or cause—speculation signaled by *because*, *possibly*, or *perhaps*. The cumulative syntax also invites the placement of speculative phrases in the initial or medial slots in the sentence, but I've focused on the final slot simply to take full advantage of the generative power of the cumulative. Nor do the heuristic prompts I've singled out exhaust the possibilities for introducing such speculation. Indeed, *for* and *as* can be used interchangeably with *because*. I suspect that each of us gravitates toward one of these options more than the other two, and I further suspect we do so because we sense at least connotative differences among the three.

And should we wish to move beyond speculation to offer an explanation between our thinking and apparent or received truth, we might wish to introduce our summative cumulative modifying phrase with a word such as *likely*, a phrase such as *more likely*, or a word as insistent as *actually*. The verbs most frequently associated with the kind of writerly speculation

I'm advocating are *seems* and *appears*, the verbal, participial forms of both, *seeming* and *appearing* custom-made for introducing speculative cumulative modifying phrases.

By this point in the lecture I must seem less and less concerned with the production and inclusion in our writing of cumulative sentences and more and more concerned with ways in which we foreground ourselves in our writing as thinkers, developing the ethical appeal of our writing. Obviously there are an almost infinite number of ways we can call attention to ourselves as the consciousness, the personality, behind what we write. Perhaps I should acknowledge once again that my approach to teaching writing does value very highly the *ethos* aspect of rhetorical situations, in part because those other two classic components of rhetoric, *logos* and *pathos*, strike me as much more beyond the reach of writing instruction since they are context-dependent.

We are now fast approaching an important turning point in this course. It's time now for us to turn our attention to the delaying strategies of periodic or suspensive sentences and to the powerful rhythmic appeal and emphatic power of balanced forms and serial constructions. We will discover that the versatility of the cumulative sentence can also be extended to help us master these new forms, although cumulative syntax will now become only one of many different means to the end of making our writing more effective. ■

Question to Consider

1. Write a smooth-sounding cumulative sentence that uses no less than 100 words. Your sentence should sound as smooth and natural as possible. It may also be compound, with modifying levels for each of two or more base clauses joined by conjunctions. It's more fun, though, to see if you can construct your 100-word sentence around a single base clause.

The Riddle of Prose Rhythm

Lecture 13

The topic of prose rhythm is tremendously more complicated and tremendously less understood, much less agreed upon, than is the topic of rhythm in dance or music or even in poetry.

Most of us recognize distinctive rhythms in prose but have never stopped to think about them in terms of the relationship between the long and short steps by which our sentences move forward in time. One way of thinking about these rhythmic relationships is to compare them with the dih/dah or dot/dash rhythms of Morse code. For example, writers who use cumulative modifying levels frequently alternate between long and short modifying levels, with a single word producing the effect of the Morse Code dot. Thus, “Slowly, he opened the book, thumbing through its pages, stroking its cover” might be thought of as dot—dash—dash—dash.” And that rhythm can be compared with that of “He opened the book, slowly, thumbing through its pages, stroking its cover,” or dash—dot—dash—dash. Each rhythm slightly changes the sentence and can create almost hypnotic effects, as we can see in this sentence from *The Great Gatsby*: “Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips, the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch, open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind.” Dot—dot—dash—dash—dash—dash.

I can’t dance, but while my sense of rhythm is pretty hopeless when it comes to dancing, I think I have a very good ear for rhythm in prose. I recognize it when I am reading silently. I think I do a good job of invoking it when I read prose aloud, and I can be equally hypnotized by Virginia Woolf’s gentle and carefully crafted rhythms and by the sometimes manically varied rhythms found in Thomas Berger’s fiction. I’ve chosen passages from Woolf and Berger to suggest the possible range of prose rhythms. Notice that these passages are rhythmical, but not musical or even metrical—the result of how each proceeds forward in steps rather than of syllable count or meter. As Ursula K. Le Guin reminds us in her writing text, *Steering the Craft*, “The sound of language is where it all begins and what it all comes back

to. The basic elements of language are physical; the noise words make and the rhythm of their relationships. This is just as true of written prose as of poetry.” My writing students may at first roll their eyes when I tell them that

The basic elements of language are physical; the noise words make and the rhythm of their relationships.

a sentence they’ve written needs an extra beat or needs to be slowed down or speeded up, but they almost always agree with me once we start working on the sentence.

I’m going to focus this lecture on the important but unsettled topic of prose rhythm. I’ll give a very brief overview of the history of attempts to study, measure, explain, or theorize prose rhythm. I’ll offer

a couple of ways of thinking about the importance of prose rhythm. I’ll offer a modest way of thinking about prose rhythm in the cumulative sentences we’ve been working with, including a very modest model for describing the rhythms of some cumulative sentences.

Aristotle seems to have been one of the earliest to weigh in on this topic of prose rhythm. He prescribed that “prose should not be metrical, nor should it be without rhythm.” As he explained this dictum, “Metrical prose is unconvincing because it betrays artifice” and also because it “distracts the hearer, who is led to look for the recurrence of a similar metrical pattern.” But after saying that prose should not be metrical, Aristotle goes on to discuss prose rhythms in exclusively metrical terms. We can’t transfer Aristotle’s pronouncements about rhythms in Greek prose to rhythms in English prose.

Prose rhythms are simply too diverse—too variable and unpredictable—to be treated metrically, at least in the terms we use to analyze poetry: feet and syllables, stressed and unstressed. Yet the history of attempts to analyze prose rhythm shows that they are largely prone to doing just that: dividing prose passages into feet, marking accented and unaccented syllables, and identifying the meter revealed by the scan in exactly the way we identify the meter of poetry. Apart from accepting and passing along the assumption that prose rhythm is essentially just a watered-down version of poetic rhythm, most early-20th-century efforts to describe rhythm in prose manage to agree that very little agreement exists in their enterprise.

Metrical theories give us labels for metrical phenomena we can indeed find, on occasion, in prose, but those labels tell us absolutely nothing about the way prose rhythm works—about the relational realities it establishes between writers and readers. Only slightly more helpful are the related attempts to treat prose essentially as song lyrics and to describe it with musical time notations. We don't fare much better when we move to the experiential end of the continuum, where descriptions of prose rhythm invoke the rhythms of nature and the rhythms of the Bible.

One step in the right direction of understanding prose rhythm comes in another early-20th-century study, William Morris Patterson's *The Rhythm of Prose*. Patterson's study was supplemented by "voice photographs" of the wave patterns made by recordings of subjects uttering certain words and phrases. What strikes me about the Patterson study is its emphasis not only on rhythm as an experience but as inherently subjective experience. Patterson explains, "Rhythm is tangled up with our sense of time and our sense of intensity, both of which are not only tricky, but multifarious."

Patterson gives me a couple of terms I want to put to my own use. The first is his concept of the "aggressively rhythmic individual." I may be at sea on the dance floor, but when I read prose—particularly when I read prose aloud—I don the mask and cape of the "aggressively rhythmic individual," and I create in my reading the rhythms I most value. In Patterson's references to *spaced prose*, I hear an opportunity to invoke, once again, both the cumulative sentence and Josephine Miles's understanding that "prose proceeds forwards by steps less closely measured, but not less propelling, than the steps of verse."

Most of us recognize distinctive rhythms in prose but have never stopped to think about them in terms of the relationship of the long and short steps by which our sentences move forward in time. One way of thinking about these rhythmic relationships is to compare them with the dih/dah or dot/dash rhythms of Morse Code. For example, writers who use cumulative modifying levels frequently alternate between long and short modifying levels, with a single word producing the effect of the Morse Code dot. Thus, "Slowly, he opened the book, thumbing through its pages, stroking its cover" might be thought of as "dot—dash—dash—dash." To be honest, I'm still not

completely sure what use we make of the insight that cumulative sentences seem to become more dramatic when they alter phrase steps with very short, single-word steps. But once you have this pattern pointed out to you, you'll start noticing it in more and more cases as a device used by a wide range of writers. ■

Question to Consider

1. Find five sentences (or sequences of sentences) whose effectiveness comes from variation in sentence length or in the length of modifying phrases.

Cumulative Syntax to Create Suspense

Lecture 14

In grammatical terms, sentences fall into just two main categories: sentences that are loose, putting the subject and the verb near the beginning of the sentence, and sentences that are periodic, delaying the unfolding of the sentence's most important news until its very end, demanding the reader's close attention—sometimes to the last word.

This lecture will complicate the binary opposition between *loose* and *periodic* sentences by demonstrating that sentences take their place in a continuum of delay and can best be thought of not as *types* but in terms of their degree of *suspensiveness*. The degree of suspensiveness of a cumulative sentence can be manipulated by the placement of its base clause. Thus we can start with a loose cumulative sentence. (“He sat down, rubbing his hands together, running his hungry eyes over the steaming food, anticipating the feast, savoring its aromas, stunned by his good fortune, realizing an opportunity like this might never come again.”) and move its base clause toward the end of the sentence one phrase at a time, ending with a periodic cumulative sentence (“Rubbing his hands together, running his hungry eyes over the steaming food, anticipating the feast, savoring its aromas, stunned by his good fortune, realizing an opportunity like this might never come again, he sat down.”) Thinking of degrees of suspense in our writing gives us much greater control over our sentences than does thinking of a kind of sentence that is loose and is the opposite of a kind of sentence that is periodic.

Most of the sentences we've worked with so far in this course have been, in grammatical terms, “loose sentences.” They complete the basic pattern of subject and predicate early on, keeping subject and verb near the beginning of the sentence and close together. Most cumulative sentences are forms of loose syntax, quickly positing an initial base clause, then adding to it in modifying phrases that follow. The opposite of a loose sentence is a “periodic sentence” that delays or suspends the completion of its subject-verb clause until the very end. The periodic sentence seems particularly useful in periodic discourse, where “if ... then” constructions are frequently found.

Grammatical terminology stacks the deck against loose syntax when its opposite is not *tight* but *periodic* syntax. Even if we have no idea what “periodic” means, it sounds more formal, more businesslike, more impressive than *loose*. That’s exactly the way most writing guides have constructed this opposition, associating loose sentences with simple or simplistic expression and equating periodic sentences with more sophisticated, complex thinking. Accordingly, many writing texts until the past few years have implied, if not prescribed, that writers should aspire to the formal maturity of the periodic sentence. In his 22nd principle of composition, Professor Strunk explains that “the effectiveness of the periodic sentence arises from the prominence it gives the main statement” by placing it at the end of the sentence. E. B. White certainly uses periodic technique and shows that the suspense it can build may be quite anticlimactic. My old *Harbrace College Handbook* (7th ed.) urges the writer to “gain emphasis by changing loose sentences into periodic sentences.” Both Strunk and White and the *Harbrace Handbook* make difficulty of comprehension somehow a virtue in writing. But as we are about to see, the dichotomy long perceived between loose and periodic sentences is largely a false one.

For the moment I want to consider the history of the periodic sentence and to complicate the binary opposition between loose and periodic, demonstrating that sentences take their place in a continuum of delay and are best thought of not as types but in terms of their “degree of suspensiveness.” The word “period” comes from the Greek word *periodos*, which had to do with cycles or coming back to or going around in a circle. Aristotle stressed the recurrent or reflexive nature of the periodic style as a style “that turns back on itself,” citing as examples the antistrophes of the old poets and even suggesting that a period offered an antithetical opposition. Missing from Aristotle’s view was the emphasis on interruption or delay that we now associate with periodic form. As Matthew Clark points out in his 2002 study, *A Matter of Style*, this identification of the periodic with antithesis—or with what we now think of as a balanced form—seems peculiar to Aristotle. All experts agree that the great classical master of the periodic sentence and of periodic style was the Roman orator Cicero. Ciceronian style is periodic style, as we understand the term today, particularly as it suggests delay, building to a dramatic conclusion at the end of the sentence.

Richard Lanham finds fault with both terms, *loose* and *periodic*, but notes that these terms do refer to different conceptual processes—a basic difference in how one human intelligence presents itself to another. “To imitate the mind in real-time interaction with the world is to write in some form of running style,” he suggests, explaining, “Such a syntax models the mind in the act of coping with the world.” Conversely, the periodic style dramatizes “a mind which has dominated experience and reworked it to its liking.” Lanham reminds us that “to ‘go with the flow’ is as human as to oppose it, that humankind’s bewilderment before raw event is as characteristic as the will to impose order on it.” Lanham also notes that at the end of the Renaissance “a reaction set in against periodic structure as the ideal sentence shape.” The revolt against the periodic sentence at the end of the Renaissance was only a mixed success, since, while most writing guidebooks today do warn against unrelieved strings of periodic sentences, they still suggest that the periodic sentence is what aspiring writers should try to write.

**Think of suspensiveness
as a continuum along
which sentences fall.**

I’m giving so much prominence to Lanham because I want to question the classic binary opposition between what Lanham identifies as “running” and “periodic” sentences or what is most frequently described as the opposition between loose and periodic syntax. Francis Christensen has helped us challenge this opposition with his theory of the cumulative sentence, which introduces us to one particular kind of loose sentence that grows tighter as it generates parallels, balances, even antitheses in its modifying phrases. By starting this course with the cumulative syntax and then moving on to the periodic syntax, I am not in any way suggesting that the latter somehow represents an advance or a refinement of or greater degree of sophistication than the other. I began this course with a focus on the cumulative sentence because it can provide a foundation for thinking about periodic sentences, while the reverse is not true. Nor do I want to suggest that the cumulative is somehow a superior syntax to be preferred over the periodic: My goal is to strip away several centuries of bias in favor of the periodic to celebrate these two syntaxes for their respective glories.

Let's look at some specific ways in which the grammatical distinction between cumulative and periodic sentences begin to break down. I'm going to stop using the term periodic, substituting for it suspensive, which has a connotative clean slate, only suggesting that the syntax builds suspense or suspends completion of the sentence's message to a greater or lesser degree. Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester explore this idea of degrees of suspensiveness (which they call "degrees of periodicity" in their book *The Strategy of Style*). Any sentence can be made more or less suspensive; think of suspensiveness as a continuum along which sentences fall. The more we are aware of this continuum and the more we master the sentence structures that constitute it, the more effective our writing will become. ■

Question to Consider

1. One of the great strengths of the suspensive syntax is that it allows us to write very long sentences, drawing out the final delivery of the most important information, delaying completion of the sentence by using a number of different strategies. Use this syntax to construct a smooth-sounding sentence containing not less than 100 words. Remember that the suspensive syntax can be constructed by employing within one sentence several different delaying strategies. Your sentence should sound as smooth and as natural as possible.

Degrees of Suspensiveness

Lecture 15

My interest in exploding rigid definitions and categories is in redirecting our attention to things that matter. Far too much thinking in traditional texts devoted to writing is obsessed with identifying or classifying language structures without ever wondering what those structures actually do, how they work.

If the sentence suspends completion of its message, whether by delaying its main clause until the very end, by splitting the subject from the verb with qualifying material, or by using any construction that refines, sharpens, or adds to initial information before putting it to final use, we call it periodic (or, as I suggested in the last lecture, suspensive). To be a complete stylist, to be able to display the syntactic versatility of the accomplished writer, to be able to control the rhythm of the sentence's delivery of information and shaping of affective impact, writers must have at their command each of the basic sentence patterns. The periodic/suspensive sentence reverses most of the qualities of most cumulative sentences, that it seems to suggest a greater degree of control (architectonic mastery) over the material it presents, that it almost always requires quite a few words before its rhythm is clear, and that it almost always slows the reader down should be fairly obvious. What is not so obvious is the fact that, when used effectively, the periodic/suspensive sentence can actually generate interest, combining conceptual complexity with syntactic suspense.

In the last lecture, I suggested that the two "primary kinds" of sentences aren't really two different kinds at all but represent the opposite ends of a continuum of degrees of suspense. In other words, instead of saying all sentences are either loose or periodic, it's actually more useful and more accurate to think of all sentences as making different demands on the reader's concentration and patience. Grammar and writing texts all faithfully note the differences among simple, compound, and complex sentences. None of them consider the different demands these kinds of sentences make upon readers or consider the affective difference between, say, two closely related simple sentences and a compound sentence that puts together the propositions in both. Most

grammar and writing texts are much more interested, in Steinbeck's terms, in "spine counting" than in exploring relational realities, yet it is precisely the relational reality between writer and reader that determines effective prose. One of my goals in this course has been to question whenever possible the utility of pure categories of sentences.

Richard Lanham reminds us, "Prose styles rarely come in pure forms, 'purity' being usually a tacit assumption to ignore complications for the sake of analysis." One of the things that most fascinates me about suspensive syntax is that it can be achieved in so many different ways that any attempt to create rigid or pure categories of suspensive sentences would be a hopeless waste of time. In this lecture I want to survey some of the resting points along the continuum of suspense along which all sentences fall. My goal here is to free suspensive syntax from the longstanding assumption that periodic sentences, while marks of the writer's control and sophistication, are usually long and difficult to follow.

Powerfully suspensive sentences do not have to be all that long or all that complicated, but they do need skillful handling and they generally are most effective when consciously planned. Short suspensive sentences are all around us: "It's not just a job, it's an adventure." "It's not just footwear, it's equipment." Somewhat longer suspensive sentences are also bountiful: "Excuse me while I wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes and put a small but powerful handgun to my temple." Two somewhat opposite patterns frequently found in mid-length suspensive sentences are the post-colonic drumbeat of a final word to which the sentence has been building and the completely unexpected appearance at the end of the sentence of a word or phrase no one could have predicted. Suspensive sentences lend themselves to cataloguing as a means of delaying the completion of the sentence.

The critical discourse concerning periodic sentences notes that periodic style can be distributed across several sentences, as long as delay or suspense is the goal and the completion of the point of the period is suspended to the very end of the sequence of sentences it covers. Suspensive sentences do indeed align themselves along a continuum that runs from the very unsurprising to the very surprising, from the anticlimactic to the climactic. A variation on the one-two punch suspensive combo is simply to create a cascade of suspensive

sentences, each building on the previous sentence, creating an atmosphere or climate in which delay and parenthetical digressions seem to become a kind of natural order of things. Suspensive syntax can delay our perception of the nature of the sentence as well as delaying our perception of the sentence's propositional content, as when the final step taken by the sentence reveals that it is asking a question.

In the preceding examples, we've seen that suspense comes in more shades than a certain ice cream chain has flavors, and we've seen that suspense created by syntactical delaying strategies can be put to many uses. Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester in *The Strategy of Style* suggest three main reasons for employing suspensive syntax: Varying your predominantly loose style and emphasizing your more important ideas, putting the important ideas at the end of the sentence, and sustaining interest in a long sentence. Richard Lanham shifts focus from the purposes of using suspensive style to its primary rhetorical strategies in the service of delay, identifying them as follows: suspension over a number of complex statements, parallelism of phrases and clauses, climax, and virtuoso display.

Powerfully suspensive sentences do not have to be all that long or all that complicated, but they do need skillful handling.

To these suggestions of characteristic purpose and rhetorical strategies, we should probably add a brief summary of the broad moves involved in creating suspensive syntax. If the sentence suspends completion of its message, whether by delaying its main clause until the very end, by splitting the subject from the verb with qualifying material, or by using any construction that refines, sharpens, or adds to initial information before putting it to final use, it has been historically termed a periodic sentence, but I think it more accurate to refer to it as a suspensive sentence. The fact that the periodic/suspensive sentence reverses most of the qualities of most cumulative sentences, that it seems to suggest a greater degree of control over the material it presents, that it almost always requires quite a few words before its rhythm is clear, and that it almost always slows the reader down should be fairly obvious. Not so obvious is the fact that when used effectively the periodic/suspensive sentence can actually generate interest, combining conceptual complexity with syntactic suspense.

Four broad delaying tactics mark the periodic/suspensive sentence, two of them relying on modifiers to delay completion of the base clause, the other two using initial clauses/phrases either as modifiers or as extended subjects.

- An inverted cumulative works periodically, forestalling the base clause by a number of modifying levels, keeping the distinctive cumulative rhythm but putting it to suspensive effect.
- Completion of the base clause can also be delayed, interposing modifying or qualifying material between the subject and the verb of the sentence, a splitting tactic that runs the risk of losing or alienating the reader; this is easily the least controlled or focused periodic form.
- Initial qualifying constructions lead to more complicated periodic structures, presenting information that becomes complete—safe to accept as final—only when joined with or reassessed in light of information in the base clause, a process signaled by opening words such as *although*, *even*, or *if*.
- Finally, an extended subject produces similar results, initially offering an infinitive or relative clause, bringing the sentence into focus only when it becomes clear that what at first may have looked like a complete sentence is actually no more than the subject of a much longer sentence.

Experiment with suspensive syntax, and I bet you'll generate sentences you'll find incredibly satisfying. ■

Question to Consider

1. “Under the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams.”

That’s how Henry Adams began his famed autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*. He used the suspensive/periodic form to pack a wealth of information and atmosphere into his first sentence.

Here’s how Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf’s husband, began his autobiography: “Looking back at the eight of eighty-eight over the fifty-seven years of my political work in England, knowing what I aimed at and the results, meditating on the history of Britain and the world since 1914, I see clearly that I achieved practically nothing.”

Write three possible first sentences for your autobiography, each one constructing or introducing your life story from a different angle. Each sentence should be highly suspensive/periodic, and each should try to follow Adams’s example of packing as much information as possible into each sentence. It’s up to you whether you choose to write in the first person, like Woolf, or in the third person, as Adams did.

The Mechanics of Delay

Lecture 16

Punctuation may not exactly be big business, but it apparently is a large enough source of anxiety for enough of us to support a cottage industry of punctuation guides.

Various delaying tactics mark the periodic sentence, giving it a suspenseful quality, a sense of its constituent parts being juggled or scrambled until the very last moment, the “shot at the buzzer,” finally falling into place at the very end of the sentence, resolved by the verb or modifier that allows us to process the information that has come before. We have seen four broad tactics thus far, two of them relying on modifiers to delay completion of the base clause, the other two using initial clauses/phrases either as modifiers or as extended subjects: first, inverting a cumulative sentence; second, delaying completion of the base clause; third, using initial qualifying constructions; and fourth, using an extended subject. This lecture introduces a fifth and final strategy: the sentence whose message is interrupted by a colon or semicolon, where the second clause inexorably deflates, inverts, or otherwise recasts the first clause’s message. This is the classic balanced sentence.

In the last lecture, I noted that various delaying tactics mark the periodic/suspensive sentence. Five broad tactics prevail, two of them relying on modifiers to delay completion of the base clause, two using initial clauses/phrases either as modifiers or as extended subjects, and one balancing a second clause against a first, the two clauses linked by a semicolon, which is the classic structure of the balanced sentence. An inverted cumulative works periodically, forestalling the base clause by a number of modifying levels, keeping the distinctive cumulative rhythm, but putting it to suspensive effect. Completion of the base clause can also be delayed, interposing modifying or qualifying material between the subject and the verb of the sentence, a splitting tactic that runs the risk of losing or alienating the reader; this is easily the least controlled or focused periodic form.

Initial qualifying constructions lead to more complicated periodic structures, presenting information that becomes complete—safe to accept as final—only when joined with or reassessed in light of information in the base clause, a process signaled by opening words such as “although,” “even,” or “if.” Starting a sentence with either “since” or “because” will always create some degree of suspense. *Although* and *when* (if used to indicate the satisfaction of a condition) create suspensive sentences. Indeed, there are any number of left-branching sentences that open with qualifying phrases or just plain prepositional phrases that will produce significant degrees of suspense.

An extended subject produces similar results, initially offering an infinitive or relative clause, bringing the sentence into focus only when it becomes clear that what at first may have looked like a complete sentence is actually no more than the subject of a much longer sentence. And now the fifth category of suspensive sentence: the sentence whose message is interrupted by a colon or a semicolon, but inexorably deflating, inverting, or otherwise recasting that message by the one that follows the colon or semicolon, often waiting until the last word of the second clause to spring the sentence’s rhetorical trap. This is the classical form of the balanced sentence.

This fifth and final strategy, with its specification of the importance of the semicolon and colon, brings us face to face with a subject I’ve so far neglected: punctuation—more specifically, the confusion, complexity, and anxiety surrounding the use of colons and semicolons. Punctuation may not exactly be big business, but it apparently is a large enough source of anxiety for enough of us to support a cottage industry of punctuation guides. Why are we being asked to think about punctuation now? The answer is pretty simple. While the cumulative sentence makes crucial use of commas, commas are pretty easy to use and pretty hard to misuse. Suspensive sentences, particularly long suspensive sentences, also make extensive use

An inverted cumulative works periodically, forestalling the base clause by a number of modifying levels, keeping the distinctive cumulative rhythm, but putting it to suspensive effect.

of commas, but the great majority of longer suspensive sentences would be impossible to parse without relying heavily on the semicolon and the colon. And semicolons and colons are not pretty easy to use and are distressingly easy to misuse.

First the semicolon. Those of us who aspire to write lengthy suspensive sentences or balanced sentences of any length don't have the luxury of avoiding semicolons. One of the easiest-to-understand uses of the semicolon is that it helps avoid confusion in sentences that contain numerous commas. Generally, when used between clauses in a compound sentence, a semicolon suggests a more complicated relationship than do conjunctions such as *and*; a semicolon signals the kind of conceptual reversal that follows adversative conjunctions such as *however* or *nonetheless*, and a semicolon also signals degree of relationship indicated by conjunctions such as *moreover*, or *similarly*.

Now the colon. Colons may have gotten a bad reputation as almost required components in the titles of academic publications—a phenomenon sometimes disparagingly referred to as “the post-colonic surge.” The colon is a surprisingly emotional mark of punctuation. We've already seen how the colon can add emphasis to the final word in a suspensive sentence, as in “What worried me most was this: dying.” We also know that the colon signals that some sort of explanation or enumeration is coming, that what follows the colon will break down or inventory something announced before the colon. As Gordon puts it, “What follows the colon further explains, illustrates, or restates, with precise, embellished, or loquacious variation, the words leading up to the colon. This is so often the case that if the goods are not delivered, you deserve to feel betrayed: forthcoming is the colon's middle name.”

In a later lecture, we'll see how important the semicolon is in the construction of balanced sentences, and we'll consider further the kinds of relationships between clauses the semicolon can signal. ■

Question to Consider

1. Using only sentences that display some form or forms of suspensive syntax, describe a process you know well, such as tying your shoes, reading the newspaper, eating a jelly donut, brushing your teeth, getting ready for bed, etc. Your description should be no more than two pages, no less than one. Be sure to vary the strategies of delay that produce your suspensive sentences, and produce a description that sounds as natural as possible.

Prefab Patterns for Suspense

Lecture 17

One of the most persistent themes in Postmodern fiction is that the media have so saturated our consciousness that we find ourselves speaking, writing, and thinking in terms of language and formulas so ubiquitous in the media, that we find ourselves more and more describing our own situations in terms of situations depicted over and over in the media—in effect “scripting our lives” to follow the scripts made so familiar in news, film, and television.

As opposed to the formal strategies described in the previous lecture, suspensive sentences can be generated simply by starting sentences with certain words. This lecture will consider prompts that force us to think in suspensive terms. For instance, if the first word of a sentence is *if* or *even* or *when* or *because* or *since* or any number of other words or phrases that posit a condition before specifying an action or result, that sentence will exploit suspensive syntax, but this is only one of a number of syntactical or conceptual patterns that will automatically delay completion of the sentence’s message or purpose until near its end or until its very last word. This lecture will both review the prompts for this syntax and consider some of the reasons for making suspensiveness a significant strategy in our writing.

Twenty-first-century readers may have very different expectations and values than did their counterparts in earlier centuries. Cultural factors and the dominant cultural atmosphere are just as important today for the shaping of prose style as were attitudes toward science in the Renaissance or attitudes toward reason in the Enlightenment. Computers are almost certainly in the process of changing the way we experience and think about prose style. More specifically, the Internet has accustomed us to the hypertext link, where any word or phrase in a sentence can be hotlinked to a back text that can add detail or examples or can just allow us to explore loose associations with material in the front text we are reading on a Web page. E-mail, the Web, the blogosphere, and computer presentation programs such as the ubiquitous PowerPoint encourage us to embellish our prose with graphics and to animate it.

I wanted to raise the topic of electronic textuality here as part of a reminder that the prose we write and read, and the sentences we craft, reflect larger cultural changes that may at first seem far removed from nuts-and-bolts writing concerns. For instance, the sentences we write and read today have been shaped at least in part by their participation in or resistance to the cultural dominants of first modernism and then postmodernism. While few of us aspire to write like Gertrude Stein, her experiments with language, along with those of her fellow Modernists, have radically changed our expectations for literary narrative, right down to the level of the sentence.

Postmodernism has also had an impact on language use. Postmodernism has been shaped in great part by developments in technology, particularly media technologies such as film, television, and computers. Unlike modernism or Romanticism, postmodernism is an era or a set of prevailing cultural values and assumptions, rather than being an organized movement. I define postmodernism as the culture of the easy edit, suggesting the extent to which advances in science and technology make it seem as if anything can be almost effortlessly edited, reshaped, and recombined. In literature, postmodernism has been associated with a heightened sense of self-reflexivity—with literature turning back on itself to explore the vagaries of language and fiction as much or more as human experience.

I'm mentioning the broad idea of Postmodern scripting to provide a larger context for the sentence-level mini-scripting, yet another way to lengthen our sentences to give them a greater degree of suspensiveness. In addition to the formal and largely conceptual strategies described in the previous lecture, suspensive sentences can be generated simply by starting sentences with certain words. This lecture will review those initial prompts that force us to think in suspensive terms, and it will also consider a number of other generally overlooked and certainly unremarked phrase patterns that will automatically delay completion of the sentence's message or purpose until near its end or until its very last word. This new category of suspensive structures consists largely of phatic expressions whose functions are more social than discursive.

I want to briefly review the conditional words and phrases that generate suspensiveness whenever they open a sentence. If a sentence opens by positing some condition that must be met or avoided before something else can occur, then that sentence will create some degree of suspense. If the initial *if* clause is then followed by one or more other “if” clauses, if the number of preconditions grows, and if the completion of the sentence is delayed more and more by a cascade of *if* clauses, the degree of suspensiveness can become quite pronounced. Since there can be a veritable list of these initial conditions, and since even a single *if* clause can be stretched out to considerable length by increasing the detail of its specification, the degree of suspense or the degree of delay in sentences introduced by opening conditionals indicated by words such as “if,” “since,” “because,” and “although” can be extended to and past the point where a reader’s curiosity begins to turn to impatience. Writers who understand the appeal and emphasis of suspensive syntax may deliberately extend the conditional just to make the sentence unmistakably suspensive. Conditional opening constructions serve much more important functions than just delaying the end of the sentence, as they specify the conditional relationships that govern much of our experience of the world.

**In literature,
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Suspensive sentences that result from other prefab structures, such as initial infinitives used as subjects or any form of extended noun phrase subject, serve important logical functions quite apart from creating degrees of suspensiveness.

But now I want to move from the quite meaningful suspensive structures built by conditionals to consider a very different set of

prefab structures that frequently add little or no propositional meaning to the sentences they extend. These are the structures of mini-scripting. These are prefab words and phrases that go bump in our sentences, serving as syntactic speed bumps to slow our sentences down, inevitably making them a bit longer, inevitably making them a bit more suspensive. Some of these phrases have very little serious propositional content, some take on what meaning they have from the context of the sentence in which they appear, and some are virtually nonsensical. For instance, we may plop down at the outset of a sentence the phrase: “It goes without saying.”

We get the concept of a phatic utterance from pioneering anthropologist and ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski, who advanced his description of “phatic communion” in his “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages.” While Malinowski’s essay refers to “primitive languages” and his research focused on natives in the Trobriand Islands in New Guinea, he specifies at several points in his discussion of phatic utterances that they function in essentially the same way whether in savage or highly civilized cultures. What savage and civilized cultures have in common are traditions of phatic communion, which Malinowski describes as “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.” Instead of serving the purpose of reflection, these phatic utterances constitute a mode of action just in their being voiced: “Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other.” If we extend Malinowski’s discussion of phatic speech to writing, we can see written phatic utterances as nearly content-free examples of the kind of processing I’ve championed in earlier lectures—a way of reminding readers they are in contact with a mind, a person, a personality rather than with some mindlessly objective recording or reporting of data. Phatic phrases can both raise and lower the dramatic emphasis of a sentence’s propositional content, interrupting the flow of the sentence either to highlight what follows the intensifying phrase or to tone down or qualify following information. We will revisit this concept of prefab phatic phrases in a future lecture, when we will consider the many duple rhythm phrases we drop into our speaking and writing, paired words such as willy-nilly, hocus-pocus, wishy-washy, flip-flop, tacky-tacky, doom and gloom, rough and tumble, and so on. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Find up to five scripted phrases from television, newspapers, radio, advertising, popular music, or movies (from any era) that have made their way into commonplace speech.
2. Do you have any favorite phatic phrases that you are in the habit of using, in speech or writing?

Balanced Sentences and Balanced Forms

Lecture 18

Most writing texts today focus on parallelism, balance having apparently fallen out of favor as too arbitrary or too artificial a writing trope.

A balanced sentence hinges in the middle, usually split by a semicolon, the second half of the sentence paralleling the first half, but changing one or two key words or altering word order. In this sense, the second half of the sentence can be thought of as a kind of mirror image of the first half, the reflection reversing the original image. Balanced sentences really call attention to themselves and stick in the mind, drawing their power from the tension set up between repetition and variation. Because the real power of the balanced sentence comes only at its end, it can be thought of as another form of periodic/suspensive sentence—perhaps the most intense form. In an odd way, the balanced sentence also works generatively or heuristically, as does the cumulative, since you can set the balance in motion without really knowing where you want the sentence to go. Apart from its aphoristic nature, the balanced sentence offers an obvious advantage to any writer who must compare two subjects.

Recently, I asked the students in my Prose Style class to think of memorable first sentences from novels. The one opening line everyone in the class remembered was “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” the supremely balanced first words of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens made that opening so memorable by exploiting in just a few words almost all of the strategies of syntactic balance. What my students did not remember is that “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” is not the first sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities* but is instead only the first of a string of balanced clauses and conceptual balances that combine to form a first sentence that keeps going for 118 words. What makes this famous opening of Dickens’s novel so memorable is variously referred to as its balanced form or its extended parallelism.

These two concepts exist in a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship: Either balance is the heart of parallelism, or parallelism is the heart of balance. A balanced sentence hinges in the middle, usually split by a semicolon, the second half of the sentence paralleling the first half, but changing one or two key words or altering word order. Dickens's first sentence in *A Tale of Two Cities* doesn't exactly fit the bill for a formally balanced sentence, but each of its seven initial paired clauses could, reminding us that sometimes a comma does the work of a semicolon in these constructions.

These two concepts exist in a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship: Either balance is the heart of parallelism, or parallelism is the heart of balance.

Edward Everett Hale, Jr., descendant of American patriot Nathan Hale, and son of the famous orator and author of the short story, "The Man Without a Country," drew this distinction between balance and parallelism in his *Constructive Rhetoric*, published in 1896. Hale explained that "parallel construction usually arranges several clauses as if side by side, connected by the punctuation, while a balance, as it were, hangs to clauses one on each side of a conjunction or its equivalent." Writing specifically about Samuel Johnson, W. K. Wimsatt Jr. offers a further distinction between balance and parallelism. Wimsatt refers to Johnson's parallelism of meaning as opposed to his parallelism of sound, suggesting that critics who refer to Johnson's balance are actually more aware of the latter kind of parallelism than of the former. He adds that references to cadence and to rhythm generally have more to do with balance than with parallelism.

While some discussions treat parallelism and balance as the same thing, others insist that these terms refer to distinct phenomena. Most writing texts today focus on parallelism. I tell my students that parallelism is the foundation that underlies both the double beats of balance and the three-part rhythms of serial construction. Double and triple rhythms are really the only rhythms the writer of prose can consistently employ to any significant effect, so I see parallelism as the building block from which we construct both crucial rhythms. Parallelism largely accounts for the ebb and flow rhythm of

the cumulative sentence. Some coordinate cumulative sentences foreground parallelism. Parallelism contributes to the power of the cumulative syntax even when the parallels are less obvious, as when the final word or phrase of a base clause is matched by starting the next modifying level with a similar kind of word, adjective leading to adjective, adverb to adverb, or noun to noun. Parallelism is made unavoidably obvious if the final word of the base clause is simply repeated as the first word of the cumulative modifying phrase. Modest examples of parallelism in cumulative syntax can be heightened and extended to produce sentences with elaborately parallel phrases. Parallelism also figures prominently in a number of the patterns that produce suspensive sentences. It seems clear that parallelism, like suspensiveness, is always a matter of degree, ranging from the minutest parallels of syllable count and sound, through parallels of length and parts of speech to conceptual parallels so broad or abstract as to initially escape our notice.

Parallelism is the starting point for both powerful and playful prose, but most writing texts present parallelism in terms of rules of correctness as opposed to something we should celebrate. For example, Professor Strunk informed his writing students that they should “express coordinate ideas in similar form,” explaining that the principle of parallel construction “requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar.” (*Elements of Style*, p. 26) In similar fashion, *The Little, Brown Essential Handbook* (5th ed.) offers this restrained definition: “Parallelism matches the form of your sentence to its meaning: When your ideas are equally important or parallel, you express them in similar, or parallel grammatical form.”

The *Harbrace College Handbook* does go on to say that to create parallel structure the writer should “balance a word with a word, a phrase with a phrase, a clause with a clause, a sentence with a sentence,” followed by examples of awkward failures of parallelism and their improved parallel versions, once again placing more emphasis on error avoidance than on the rhetorical benefits of parallelism. Parallelism still has an effective champion in Virginia Tufte, who devotes a chapter to it in her *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. “Parallelism,” Tufte quite reasonably explains, “is saying like things in like ways. It is accomplished by repetition of words and syntactic structures in planned symmetrical arrangements and, if not overdone, has

a place in day-to-day writing.” (Tufte, p. 217) Tufte acknowledges that deliberately faulty parallelism, the frustration of our expectation that a structure will be repeated, can sometimes be seen as a syntactic strength. She notes that the repetition called for to achieve parallelism can sometimes be understood through ellipsis. She presents balance as a subset of parallelism and offers an extended discussion of strategies that produce balance.

Earlier, I wondered when parallelism and balance fell on hard times in the teaching of writing, and, while I can’t pinpoint a date for that, I think I can offer an explanation tied to and possibly stuck in history. The problem is that the great majority of examples of sustained parallelism and extended balance in almost every writing guidebook are taken from Samuel Johnson and John Lyly. I’ll turn to a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Dr. Johnson in my next lecture, and for now will close my brief discussion of balance and parallelism with a few words about Lyly. So patterned and mannered, paralleled and balanced was the prose in Lyly’s *Euphues* that it has given us the rhetorical term *euphuism*, terming euphuism “the rhetorical prose style par excellence.” Richard Lanham explains that it “emphasizes the figures of words that create balance, and makes frequent use of antithesis, paradox, repetitive patterns with single words, sound-plays of various sorts, amplification of every kind, sententiae and especially the unnatural natural history or simile from traditional natural history.” The extreme limit Lyly’s prose represents does not have to discourage us from occasional excursions along the continuum of parallelism. ■

Question to Consider

1. Write a good, long paragraph in which you tackle what is popularly dismissed as the toughest comparison task of all: comparing apples and oranges. Your comparison should contain a veritable three-ring circus of balanced sentences and balanced forms—like Dr. Johnson in his comparison of Dryden and Pope.

The Rhythm of Twos

Lecture 19

One of the best-known examples of the balanced sentence comes from John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

The double beat or duple rhythm of balanced form may derive its almost visceral power from the basic lub-dub beat of the human heart; the doubled words and forms of the balanced sentence derive their power and ability to stick in the mind from a mirroring effect that asks not what we can do with balanced form but what balanced forms do to us. Or, it may be related to the human tendency to create binary oppositions—good/bad, right/left, up/down, in/out, hot/cold, etc. Balanced syntax and forms of balance within elements of the sentence do more than just create a two-beat rhythm, however. It imparts to your writing a sense of certainty, the sound of confidence, the effect of finality. Indeed, it is no surprise that balanced form (sometimes called the *two-part series*) is frequently found in religious writing. Balanced form can rise from any use of parallel phrases, words, letters, sounds, ideas, images—two of anything, and the more extensive the balances the greater the impact of the writing, as is suggested by a sentence from its great master, Samuel Johnson: "Dryden's page is a natural field, rising into inequalities, and diversified by the varied exuberance of abundant vegetation; Pope's is a velvet lawn, shaven by the scythe, and leveled by the roller."

Balance and parallelism are often discussed as if they were interchangeable terms and, in a sense, they are. I want to discuss balance first as a formal sentence syntax and then as a form or rhythm that can appear within or among sentences whenever there is some pairing of sound, word, phrase, or concept, or any use of language that foregrounds two of anything. Balanced form can range from the obvious syntactic pairing of chiasmus to more subtle oppositional pairing. A balanced sentence hinges in the middle, usually split by a semicolon, the second half of the sentence paralleling the first half, but changing one or two key words or altering word order.

Balanced sentences really call attention to themselves and stick in the mind, drawing their power from the tension set up between repetition and variation. Since the real power of the balanced sentence comes only at its end, it can be thought of as another form of periodic sentence. In an odd way, the balanced sentence also works generatively or heuristically, as does the cumulative, since you can set the balance in motion without really knowing where you want the sentence to go. This fill-in-the-blank phenomenon suggests that the form of the balanced sentence may be more memorable than the meaning conveyed by and through that form.

Balance is the specific syntactic tool ready-made for comparisons. Samuel Johnson is probably the greatest master of the balanced form. Johnson's comparison of Pope and Dryden displays a second kind or degree of balance, that of smaller forms within the sentence and of those forms between and among sentences. Any time that a sentence, part of a sentence, or groups of sentences make us aware of pairs of things—whether objects, sounds, words, syntactic structures—that reveals some degree of balanced form. This kind of balance can take almost any shape or form and can appear at almost any time. It may come from the insinuating insistence of alliteration, assonance, or consonance, or from the pronounced parallelism of phrases and modifiers, metaphors, and the larger syntax of the sentence. Balance may even come from a conceptual dualism—a thought that focuses our thinking, inexorably, on two subjects, entities, ideas, or images. Dr. Johnson's comparison of the two poets contains almost all of these forms of balance. The question we aspiring students of the sentence must answer for ourselves before we decide whether in-your-face balance will be a feature in our syntactic arsenal is simply this: Does Dr. Johnson's prose strike us as impressive or obsessive, well-crafted to positive effect, or overdone to the point of putting readers off?

The problem with balance, as is the problem with any syntax pushed too hard, is that it levels reality, forcing everything into binary agreement or opposition.

The problem with balance, as is the problem with any syntax pushed too hard, is that it levels reality, forcing everything into binary agreement or opposition. In an essay of Johnson's parallelism, W. K. Wimsatt Jr. has outlined the case against balance. Wimsatt observes that Johnson runs the risk of "preferring the meaning of parallel to a more relevant meaning of variety." Hazlitt advances much the same critique of pronounced balanced form, using Edmund Burke as his target. In his review of "Boswell's Life of Johnson," (1831), Thomas Babington Macaulay, who, it should be remembered was himself known for his use of balanced form, accused Johnson of writing in "Johnsonese," a style that he called "systematically vicious." George Saintsbury disagreed, terming Macaulay's description of Johnson's style "one of the worst parts of his essay."

What's missing so far in these discussions of balance is the fact that they are so much fun for the writer to construct and for the reader to recognize. Matthew Clark touches on this underreported aspect in his book, *A Matter of Style: On Writing and Technique*, where he recognizes that "there is a great vigor and pleasure" in the writing of sustained parallelism and balance. In the writing of William Gass, we find an even more effective brief for the use of balance, as Gass goes for balances at every opportunity. America has no more innovative a prose stylist than Gass, and it is his example, not Dr. Johnson's, that I follow when I champion the use of balanced forms in effective writing. ■

Question to Consider

1. Write five aphoristic sentences, about the most ordinary occurrences in life (such as relationships, or being placed on hold, or walking the dog) that make the maximum use of balanced forms. This is one to have fun with and go overboard.

The Rhythm of Threes

Lecture 20

Winston Weathers, in a pioneering essay on “The Rhetoric of the Series,” notes that the writer can “write the two-part series and create an aura of certainty, confidence, didacticism, and dogmatism,” or “can write the three-part series and create the effect of the normal, the reasonable, the believable, and the logical,” or “can write the four-or-more-part series and suggest the human, emotional, diffuse, and inexplicable.”

Just as Dr. Johnson is the master of balance, Bacon is the master of parallel three-part series. Balance is the rhythm of twos, series is the rhythm of threes, and parallel serial constructions echo, invoke, and build upon our penchant for measuring, describing, and constructing reality in units of threes. Three phrases of parallel construction, three-part predicates, three attempts to say exactly the right thing all invoke serial form. A series, however, is more than just a list with three or more items in it: At the heart of this form is some kind of unity, some kind of progression, some kind of intensification. What distinguishes the series is that its elements build on each other, add to each other’s impact, restate and refine each other’s information. The series may mark a temporal progression, establish a chronology, or outline a process. In a way, the series is a kind of balance that has been extended since the more parallel the elements of the series—whether elements of syntax, diction, sound, or concept—the more pronounced the serial construction. *Veni, vidi, vici.* (I came, I saw, I conquered.)

The most pronounced serial construction has three parts, although a series can be extended beyond three elements (or reduced to two). The ties among kinds of serial constructions

are quite complex; one three-part series balances quite effectively against another, a three-part series may be composed of three two-part balances, and a four-part series can easily be shaped to lend its catalog to either two- or three-part rhythm. Furthermore, serial constructions invite asyndeton (the

The most pronounced serial construction has three parts, although a series can be extended beyond three elements.

omitting of conjunctions) or polysyndeton (the foregrounded/excessive use of conjunctions). Another rhetorical device invited by serial construction is anaphora—beginning each element in the series with the same word or words. Of course, the opposite of anaphora is epistrophe—ending each item in a series with the same word or words. Combine anaphora and epistrophe and you get—symplece.

Three-part serials can be overdone. Of course, this is true of all syntactical patterns we've been working with and, for that matter, it's true of just about everything in general. Modern readers probably have a much greater tolerance for pronounced serial constructions than they have for pronounced balance, and the three-part series does not seem as tied to the rhetoric of earlier centuries as does balance. In a word, it sounds more reasonable. Just as Dr. Johnson is the exemplum par excellence of balance, Francis Bacon is the triple-crown winner of three-part serial form, with his "Of Studies" possibly the most intense example we have of sustained serial construction.

We can consider examples by Carl Klaus, my colleague at Iowa and, along with novelist Thomas Berger, one of my two great mentors in matters having to do with prose style. From Carl Klaus we can learn that the basic patterns for serial construction can be categorized in three ways: the phasal series, the clausal series, and rhetorical schemes and tropes like the following:

- Schemes of Omission, such as asyndeton and ellipses.
- Schemes of Repetition, such as alliteration, anaphora, anadiplosis, assonance, chiasmus, epanalepsis, epistrophe, isocolon, polyptoton, polysyndeton, symplece, and tricolon.

These are but a few of the rhetorical schemes and tropes that can create and intensify parallelism in general and three-part serials in particular. There is some disagreement about the difference between a trope and a scheme, but generally tropes have primarily to do with meaning, either of a word whose meaning is changed or extended, while schemes have to do with the ordering of words and sounds. Accordingly, we might think of a metaphor as a trope, while repetition or alliteration would be a scheme. Let's just call both rhetorical moves. Richard Lanham specifies 34 different rhetorical moves

associated with the creation of balance or antithesis and 36 associated with parallelism of letters, syllables, sounds, words, clauses, phrases, sentences, and ideas, so this small sampling only begins to suggest the care with which ancient orators and writers constructed their discourse. To be effective writers we certainly don't need to command all of the relatively few forms I've just mentioned, but just knowing that these forms exist increases the likelihood that we will find some occasion in which it makes sense to tap some of their power. ■

Question to Consider

1. Using only serial sentences and/or sentences brimming with parallel serial constructions of all kinds, write a short essay on the subject of being stuck in traffic. To make this assignment interesting, treat it as a chance to play in the most extravagant way with the serial and parallel constructions, that is, to go overboard in finding a creative approach to the subject and in indulging in all the resonances of these forms.

Balanced Series and Serial Balances

Lecture 21

Against binaries such as past and present, the three-part series reminds us to expand our view to consider the future. When we consider the age-old dichotomy of mind and body, the three-part serial reminds us to add soul, and so on.

Balance one three-part series against another or construct a three-part series of balanced forms and the sentence can become a pinball machine of sounds, rhythms, images, and ideas. I can't think of any modern writer who does a better job of constructing verbal pinball machines than William Gass. Gass is the David May Distinguished University Professor Emeritus in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis, where for many years he taught philosophy and English. More important, he is one of America's most celebrated writers and critics. Among prose stylists who have thought long and hard about prose, he has no equal. Examples from Gass's writing remind us that sentences do things, are alive, are closely tied to the body's basic rhythms, and, when in the hands of a masterful writer, can be taught steps that dance across the lips and across the page. Through his writing, Gass suggests the uncharted power a writer can tap when combining duple and triple rhythms.

In the last lecture, I gave a brief overview of the attempt by Winston Weathers to theorize the rhetorical effect and impact of two- and three-part serial constructions. Weathers suggested that the two-part series, which we have been calling balance or balanced form, has connotations of authority and expertise, if not of authoritarianism. In contrast, the three-part series, according to Weathers has connotations of the reasonable, the believable, and even the logical. I did not mention what Weathers had to say about serial constructions of four or more parts because, while these longer constructions clearly invoke the affective power or parallelism, I'm not sure readers can really process in any meaningful way four or more sound patterns or conceptual units without simply thinking of them as a list.

Before we consider the possible sources and implications of the patterns of balance and three-part serial constructions, however, let's get a better structured sense of how these rhythms can be put together, and to what effect. We can find numerous examples of the interplay of two- and three-beat rhythms in the lush style associated with Lyly and other euphuistic writers of the 16th century. The curt or pointed style of Francis Bacon, so well known for its three-part serials, also contains a striking number of balances, as we have seen in the selection from his "Of Studies." On the other hand, the fabled balances of Dr. Johnson and, as we shall soon see, of Macaulay, regularly employ three-part serials. While my own examples of the interplay of balance and series are relatively crude, they illustrate the basic options for balancing one series against another.

We've seen how Gass weaves these rhythms together in patterns that are unexpected, but we should remember that they have much more frequently been combined in patterns that were almost diagrammatic. Macaulay denounced Dr. Johnson for the artificiality of his over-designed prose, but Macaulay is himself regarded as a master of balanced form, and his balances frequently employ or are employed by three-part serial constructions. The difference between Gass and Macaulay is much greater than the difference between a carefully controlled manipulation of prose rhythms and an exuberant gush; it is the difference between what we might call a classical view of rhetoric and what we might call a postmodern view. Macaulay saw his control of tropes, schemes, syntax, and other structures as a supporting adjunct to his arguments, moves that clarified and emphasized the propositional and logical content of his claims. Gass also presents his celebrations of sound and syntax in support of claims about the subject matter of his sentences but, for Gass, his sentences themselves are always part of the point of his writing, if not the main point.

Gass *always* sees language as a subject every bit as interesting and important as is the referential world his language points to, invokes, or stands for.

In keeping with his place in the forefront of postmodern writers, Gass *always* sees language as a subject every bit as interesting and important as is the referential world his language points to, invokes, or stands for. For Gass, the instance of his discourse is always center stage, his writing always about writing just as surely as it is about the people, the prose, or whatever phenomena it seems to put forward as his subjects. I mention this aspect of Gass's prose here only to suggest that his use of sound and syntax, even when it seems to parallel or echo that of classical rhetoricians such as Macaulay, is significantly different. And we write in the context of that difference. Like it or not, our prose style takes its place in a world that has been reconfigured by the aesthetics and assumptions of postmodernism just as surely as postmodernism has been configured and constituted by the progress of technology, particularly media technology.

In this and previous lectures we've seen numerous examples of balance, three-part serials, and ways in which these two basic rhythms can be made to work together, each intensifying the other. Now it's time to consider for a few moments why these rhythms are so prominent in English prose. I have previously discussed prefab phatic phrases that act as syntactic speed bumps in sentences, slowing them down and drawing them out. Now I want to mention a very different kind of phatic prefab construction that, if anything, may serve to speed a sentence up. These prefab phrases so intensely invoke balanced rhythm that they accentuate any other balances that may have been constructed within or between sentences. Now, these minibalances can themselves be used to create the collision of two- and three-beat rhythms we've been looking at and listening to in this lecture. But such a sentence has a certain unfortunate, dare I say it, singsong quality.

My purpose in calling attention to these phrases—apart from the fact that they are really fun to read aloud—is to suggest, as they do, that balance is no artificially constructed or carefully architected rhetorical phenomenon, but speaks to something far more basic and vigorous in our lives. Binary oppositions such as up/down, in/out, good/bad, and sweet/salty, regularly divide the world of our experience into twos, and we build from these basic binaries ever larger balanced explanations of the way things are. It seems

likely to me that our binging on balance has a visceral antecedent in the bilateral symmetry of our bodies, the inhalation and exhalation of our life breath, the lub-dub rhythm of the human heart. Such as rhythms connate certainty and authority because balance has to do with the very rhythms that keep us going. Against binaries such as past and present, the three-part series reminds us to expand our view to consider the future; when we consider the age-old dichotomy of mind and body, the three-part serial reminds us to add soul, and so on.

A syllogism consists of three parts: major premise, minor premise, and conclusion; and for the rhetorician the three appeals are to pathos, ethos, and logos; the color wheel suggests that all colors come from the basic trio of red, yellow, and blue; matter divides into solid, liquid, and gas; that basic building block of matter, the atom, is made up of electron, neutron, and proton. Three dimensions, a calendar divided into days, months, and years; a school system divided into elementary, middle, and high schools; our food divided into carbohydrates, proteins, and fats—all these are the three-part constructions we have chosen to make sense of our world. So, is the appeal of three-part serial constructions really much of a mystery? These artificial rhythms of rhetoric, the balance of duple rhythm, and the three-beat form of serial constructions are not artificial at all, but merely extend the central organizing constructs of human consciousness into language.

Of all the wisdom I find in Gass's electric prose, what impresses me most is that his syntactical showing off, the unexpected metaphors and sometimes silly similes, and the obvious attention he lavishes on every word—all of which remind us that words matter, that sentences matter, that there is nothing artificial in artifice. ■

Question to Consider

1. Look in magazines that pay attention to writing (*The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books* are a few) and find five sentences that you like. Note whether they use some of the syntactic strategies we've discussed in this course so far.

Master Sentences

Lecture 22

Master sentences exist at the opposite end of the syntactical continuum from kernel sentences. They tend to be much longer than readers normally expect, although length is not in itself a sign of either a master sentence or of a writer's mastery.

This lecture will examine self-conscious sentences that practically scream for our attention by virtue of their excessiveness. Very long sentences or sentences that function in remarkable ways might be called master sentences—a nod at once to their originality and to their control. However, an effective one can only be constructed by combining a number of the syntactic moves that have been the subject of this course. I've already admitted that I don't know how to teach anyone to write really short sentences. They must rise from the writer's situation and present themselves, unexpectedly, as syntactic and rhetorical opportunities.

We can prepare ourselves for the possibility that a sentence we are writing will take on a life of its own and insist on its own development far past the normal limits of our composition. In some ways, we have already begun this preparation with our work on suspensive sentences. In other ways, we have already begun to prepare for it simply by looking at striking sentences written by a wide range of writers who obviously believed the sentence itself is worthy of careful design.

In her essay "Inviting the Muses," poet, essayist, and writing teacher Marguerite Young describes one of the first exercises she assigns in her writing classes, a requirement that her students compose a sentence at least three pages long, grammatically logical, pleasingly rhythmical, and closely documented. Noting that these requirements compel the writer to put into the sentence exactly the things that are usually absent in short sentences, Young terms the result a dragnet sentence. She observed, "Anyone who can master the architectonics of a long sentence learns what its validities and uses are—and can master a short sentence thereafter."

Master sentences are by nature loners—when they form a crowd, they lose most of their impact and can actually reach a point of diminished returns, where they signal a writer’s weakness rather than strength. A master sentence that works will always be a form of a suspensive sentence: If it manages to hold the reader’s interest to the end of a sentence that clearly is invested in extending itself, there must be some sense that the sentence still has something important to disclose or that there is some good reason for it to keep going. The end point of a master sentence may not be a surprise in the classic sense of coming down to the very last word before the sense or purpose of the sentence is clear, but there is usually some sense of discovery inherent in the fact that the sentence extended itself to such a degree.

Any attempt to classify or categorize master sentences is doomed to failure. Still, there are some functions or patterns we can observe and keep in the backs of our minds for situations in our own writing where those functions or patterns may be useful. Some master sentences simply seem to meander, almost marking time, waiting for something else to occur to the writer or to happen in the prose. Some master sentences seem to twist and turn like a snake, going through syntactical moves that we might call serpentine. Some master sentences display an almost dogged sense of honing in on a final piece of information or a conclusion with radar-guided precision. Martin Luther King was a master of this technique. Master sentences do not have to be long or particularly intricate. Some master sentences clearly build to a climax, using various delaying tactics to increase the suspensive power of what the sentence finally reveals. Some master sentences simply seem reluctant, hesitant, and/or unsure of where they will finally go, or unwilling to get there, as if delaying bad news. Some master sentences simply invoke or mirror some kind of remarkable excess associated with their ostensible subject or focus; they’re almost inventories. ■

We can prepare ourselves for the possibility that a sentence we are writing will take on a life of its own.

Question to Consider

1. Choose a base clause. Modify it with base clauses following the ten patterns for adding second-level modifying phrases.

Sentences in Sequence

Lecture 23

Most of what we think of as the definition of and rules for the paragraph we owe to one brilliant but eccentric Scottish polymath, Alexander Bain, who in his 1866 book *English Composition and Rhetoric* made up the rules for the paragraph we now generally treat as if Moses had brought them down from the mountain.

Occasions for writing single sentences with no surrounding context are exceedingly rare. Most writing situations call for more than one sentence. Many, if not most of the sentences we write have trouble standing alone since they contain—and sometimes their effective functioning depends upon—cohesive links to surrounding sentences. Examples of this cohesion phenomenon are too numerous to mention, but my use of this cohesion phenomenon in this sentence would be a start on such an inventory of context-related, if not context-dependent aspects of sentences.

M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan had pretty much both the first and the last word to say about the ways in which sentences Velcro® together in their groundbreaking and massively authoritative 1976 study, *Cohesion in English*. Halliday and Hasan identified five major categories of cohesive ties among sentences, 19 subcategories, and even a number of sub-subcategories. *Cohesion in English* remains the foundational work on the way sentences stick together, though other interesting texts address the topic as well.

The number of considerations that shape our writing multiply dramatically when we move beyond the sentence to larger units of discourse. However, some of the syntactic features we have been working with at the level of the sentence also transcend the individual sentence to work in similar fashion in sequences of sentences. Sentences in sequence can function in paragraphs much as cumulative modifying phrases function in the individual sentence. The paragraph is a unit of discourse we don't actually know that much about—or at least don't much agree on what it is we do know. There is an important visual component we should acknowledge when we write sentences in sequence. We don't speak in paragraphs; we write in paragraphs.

We know the boundaries of a paragraph not by any prescriptive standards based on logic or syntax or sound, but by the simple fact that paragraphs are those sequences of sentences we see on the page as being set off by indentations. We need to remember that writing is first and foremost and

The paragraph as a form is every bit as artificial, every bit as unnatural, as are the most extreme examples of euphuistic balance and serial construction.

always itself a technological phenomenon, whether the inscribing technology is the end of a burned stick or a pointed rock used to scratch symbols on the wall of a cave or the most advanced computer and authoring software. The paragraph as a form is every bit as artificial, every bit as unnatural, as are the most extreme examples of euphuistic balance and serial construction.

Most of what we think of as the definition of and rules for the paragraph we owe to one brilliant but eccentric Scottish

polymath, Alexander Bain, who, in his 1866 book *English Composition and Rhetoric* made up the rules for the paragraph we now generally treat as law. According to Bain, the paragraph is the “division of discourse next higher than the sentence,” and it is “a collection of sentences with unity of purpose,” each paragraph handling and exhausting a distinct topic. He then offers six “certain principles that govern the structure of the paragraph, for all kinds of composition.”

Compare Bain’s specifications with those offered by the *Harbrace College Handbook*, 7th ed., some 106 years later, and you will notice remarkable similarity. In the *Harbrace Handbook* and in almost every other writing with a chapter or section devoted to the paragraph, Bain’s six principles have been boiled down to three—unity, coherence, and emphasis. But his starting assumption, that the paragraph was just the sentence writ large, its sentences the equivalent of phrases and subordinate clauses in the sentence, remains one of the central assumptions underlying most contemporary theories of the paragraph. Bain’s belief that the paragraph developed the idea initially posited by what he called the opening sentence and what is known today as the topic sentence remains one of the, if not the, most dearly held assumptions about paragraphs.

Bain got a lot of this wrong, however, and his errors have been mechanically, if not mindlessly passed down to us as the received truths of paragraph theory. Let's start with his faith in the topic sentence as the indispensable sentence that presents the subject of paragraph. In 1974, pioneering writing teacher and theorist Richard Braddock decided to put two of Bain's assumptions to the test. Braddock put together a representative selection of essays from major magazines and set about looking for topic sentences in the paragraphs in his selection. He immediately ran into trouble. When he was able to identify a topic sentence by stretching Bain's idea to cover a number of variations, he still could only find some semblance of a topic sentence in fewer than half the paragraphs he examined. In only 13 percent of the paragraphs did the topic sentence appear where promised, at the start of the paragraph. Braddock concluded both "that the notion of what a topic sentence is, is not at all clear" and that the evidence simply "did not support the claims of textbook writers about the frequency and location of topic sentences."

Possibly even more damaging to Bain's pronouncements about paragraphs are reports by Arthur A. Stern and Edgar H. Schuster of experiments they conducted in which they had respondents try to figure out how pieces of writing had been originally divided into paragraphs. Stern's paragraphing exercise asked the teachers to decide how many paragraphs a 500-word block of prose should be divided into and where the paragraph breaks should be. Stern got responses suggesting the block should be divided into either two, three, four, or five paragraphs, with only 5 out of 100 respondents paragraphing the piece as the authors had. This result led Stern to ask, "If, as the handbooks declare, a paragraph represents a 'distinct unit of thought,' why is it that we can't recognize a unit of thought when we see one? If every paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, then why don't all of us identify the same topic sentence?"

Edgar H. Schuster conducted a similar experiment, handing out at a teacher's convention an unparagraphed United States Supreme Court order consisting of 38 sentences. Each one of those 38 sentences was selected by at least one respondent as the appropriate beginning of a new paragraph. No one replicated the original paragraphing by the Supreme Court. What's more, when Schuster later tried the exercise himself, for a second time, he found

that his paragraphing choice did not agree with the first choices he had made, leading him to exclaim, “I disagreed with myself.” Schuster went on to emphasize that, regardless of its paragraph organization, the document would still be “the same piece of work.”

Most contemporary instruction concerning paragraphing is almost ridiculously normative and arbitrary rather than reflective of the myriad ways in which we actually write our paragraphs. However, I should mention one variation on the Bain paragraph you may want to add to the options open to you when you build paragraphs. Francis Christensen, for example, openly takes Bain as his guide, particularly insofar as Bain saw the paragraph as a scaled-up analogue of the sentence, each paragraph organized by a topic sentence. Christensen adds the claim that “There is a precise structural analogy, not with just any sentence, but with the cumulative sentence.” He argues, “The topic sentence of a paragraph is analogous to the base clause of such a sentence, and the supporting sentences of a paragraph are analogous to the added levels of the sentence.”

I’m warming up to the pitch I’ll make in the next lecture for a maverick philosophy of composition. This pitch has been made a number of times before, both in writing scholarship and the compelling examples offered by writers we regularly celebrate. Its most famous articulation is Winston Weathers’s argument for a Grammar B. For now, I introduce the idea of Grammar B only to leapfrog over it for a moment to suggest that we may now need to turn our attention to the possibility of a Grammar C, with that C specifically invoking the new looks and capabilities of prose made possible by computers. Winston Weathers’s idea of Grammar B presciently anticipates the new world of sentences on the screen, in its identification of new shorter and more striking blocks of prose and in its discussion of double-voice as a forerunner of the kind of metacommentary available to contemporary writers and readers through the hypertext hotlink.

Jay David Bolter and Richard Lanham have considered what happens to language when it moves from page to screen. Bolter’s *Writing Space* theorizes hypertext at the level of the book rather than the level of the sentence or paragraph, but a number of his speculations would be obvious starting points for our thinking of what a Grammar C might mean. In

his book, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, Richard Lanham views electronic textuality largely in terms of what he sees in it as a convergence of rhetorical values with the visual syntaxes of contemporary art. ■

Question to Consider

1. Have the Internet, e-mail, and rapid electronic communications had an effect on the way you write, or on the style of the material you read in these media?

Sentences and Prose Style

Lecture 24

In these lectures I have consistently advocated rule breaking, but I'm no grammatical or syntactical or rhetorical anarchist. While I believe there are many rules we should break, there are also many rules we should not break.

Prose style is determined by an almost infinite number of variables, some a matter of choices and decisions made by the writer, many more beyond the writer's control. Prose style manifests itself at an almost infinite number of levels in our use of language, making it difficult to use one term to describe phenomena associated with subjects as different as the sentence, the essay, the novel, the writer, the period, and the culture in which the writer writes, and so on. We can speak of style at the level of the word, at the level of the sentence, at the level of larger prose units such as the paragraph, at the level of the completed piece of prose, at the level of a particular writer, at the level of a particular movement embraced by writers, at the level of a particular genre or form of writing, at the level of a century, at the level of a particular nation, etc.

But some of the basic building blocks of prose style can be examined closely and described precisely—particularly as those building blocks or moves appear at the level of the sentence. This lecture will provide a reminder of the aspects of prose style covered during this course, aspects that are subject to the writer's choice, within the writer's control. These aspects play an important role in helping us develop what is sometimes called the gift of style. Unlike the gifted athlete, the gifted writer counts more on learned stylistic strategies than on natural talent. In the most important sense, style is a gift that can be passed from writer to writer, age to age. Accordingly, “the gift of style” is a phrase that rewards our taking it quite seriously, thinking not of style so much as the result of a skill or gift possessed by the writer as we think of it as a gift received and passed on in our prose, a process of gifting so brilliantly explored by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*.

The late Robert J. Connors, an influential expert in the area of rhetoric and composition, wrote an essay, starkly titled “The Erasure of the Sentence,” in which he argues that sentence- or syntax-based approaches to writing have been driven underground by larger theoretical currents in composition theory. Connors divides writing instruction based on the sentence into three broad categories, starting with Christensen’s advocacy of the benefits of the cumulative sentence. The next category Connors identifies consists of writing approaches that have at their center the rather precise imitation of sentence patterns, forms, schemes. The third category Connors describes consists of pedagogical approaches to writing centered on strategies for sentence combining. While it was never my conscious attempt, I’ve introduced you in this course to the three primary categories of sentence-based writing instruction that are the subject of Connors’s essay.

Connors cites a number of empirical studies that seem to validate the assumption that sentence-based writing pedagogies do indeed improve writing—and do so rather dramatically. These pedagogies have fallen out of fashion, in part because of a larger suspicion in English studies of empirical studies as antihumanist and a suspicion that these successful teaching techniques stifle creativity, are not located in larger theories of discourse, and might actually be demeaning to students. Connors concludes, “It really does seem that the current perception that somehow sentence rhetorics ‘don’t work’ exists as a massive piece of wish fulfillment.”

I should explain that while I have a pretty solid foundation in writing pedagogy, I am a trained writing teacher, but not a composition theorist or formal rhetorician. I go with what works for me in the writing classroom, aware of but not overly concerned with the broad cultural and sociological implications of my approach to writing sentences. These lectures are investigations, interrogations, explorations, and celebrations of the sentence and of prose style. They are not meant as a verbal textbook that sets forth yet another set of guidelines or rules for good writing. While I believe there are many rules we should break, there are many rules we should not break. As Schuster suggests, we should choose a favorite writer, preferably a modern writer, and preferably a nonfiction writer, then check to see whether a certain rule is followed by that writer.

What final words do I have to offer about style? Prose style is determined by an almost infinite number of variables, some a matter of choices and decisions made by the writer, many more beyond the writer's control. Prose style manifests itself at an almost infinite number of levels in our use of language, making it difficult to use one term to describe phenomena associated with subjects as different as the sentence, the essay, the novel, the writer, the period, and the culture in which the writer writes, and so on. This course has been built on the assumption that some of the basic building blocks of prose style can be examined closely and described precisely—particularly as those building blocks or moves appear at the level of the sentence. The best attempt I know of to consider all the factors that determine prose style is that of my colleague and mentor in most things stylistic, Carl Klaus. He concludes that

“The gift of style”

**is a phrase that
rewards our taking
it quite seriously.**

the most profound reason for studying prose style is that “when we recognize that it can ultimately shape our beliefs ... we assume the responsibility of mastering style lest we be mastered by it.”

If from Carl Klaus we get our best explanation of the importance of prose style, it is from Richard Lanham that we get the strongest argument that our characteristic approach to the importance of style is horribly wrongheaded. Lanham charges that not only is our inattention to prose style in most writing classrooms a shame, but that our valorization in writing instruction of clarity at the expense of style is nothing less than a disaster. Lanham proposes “an alternative goal: not clarity, but a self-conscious pleasure in words.”

A perfect companion to Lanham's *Style: An Anti-Textbook* is Winston Weathers's *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, published in 1980. This book expands and provides numerous examples for the idea of Grammar B that Weathers first set forth in his “Grammars of Style: New Options in Composition.” Urging us to be alert to emerging options and to “participate in creating options that do not yet exist but which would be beneficial if they did,” he called for writing instruction that identified or created more stylistic options “in all areas.”

Three characteristics of Grammar B are of particular relevance to us. From Tom Wolfe's introduction of and then codifications of the techniques of New Journalism, Grammar B borrowed the notion of the *crot*, a short, somewhat paragraph-like chunk of prose that functioned more like a stanza in poetry. A second intriguing feature of Grammar B is what Weathers terms "The Labyrinthine Sentence and the Sentence Fragment." The third feature of Grammar B I want to mention, Double-Voice, is a self-reflexive and metacritical commentary on the text.

In these lectures, I hope I've introduced both a number of practical approaches to crafting more effective—and more enjoyable—sentences. I hope I've also been able to touch on some of the fascinating issues involved in understanding how our sentences fit into the larger concerns of prose style. Now I'd like to offer a very, very brief gloss on the construction of style as a gift. In "A Primer for Teaching Style," published in the May 1974 *College Composition and Communication*, Richard Graves describes style as "a way of finding and explaining what is true." I love that description and I completely agree.

Looking at style as Graves does is an important first step toward thinking of style not as a gift that some writers have, something they can show off, but a gift that they can give away, by passing the truth of their style and the expression of their selves along to readers. In this important sense, style is indeed a gift that can and must be passed along. That is the sense in which I offer this course to you, and if you have found in it anything of value, I hope you will pass it along to others through your writing. ■

Question to Consider

1. Write a smooth-sounding cumulative sentence that uses no less than 100 words. Your sentence should sound as smooth and natural as possible. It may also be compound, with modifying levels for each of two or more base clauses joined by conjunctions. It's more fun, though, to see if you can construct your 100-word sentence around a single base clause.

Glossary

action verb: A verb that expresses an action.

base clause: The subject-verb core of a cumulative sentence that could stand alone as a sentence.

bound modifier: A modifier that is *bound* to what it modifies by a relative pronoun such as *that*, *which*, or *who*.

clause: A subject-verb combination that can stand alone in a sentence because the verb is inflected in relation to person and time.

comma splice: Two clauses joined by a comma.

connective: A strategy for building sentences by using conjunctions to add information.

coordinate: A cumulative sentence in which there is more than one second-level modifying phrase, all pointing back to the base clause and free to move.

cumulative sentence: A sentence made up of a base clause to which free modifiers have been added.

cumulative syntax: The syntax that adds information to a base clause by adding free modifiers.

dangling modifier: A modifier that appears in a sentence without anything in the sentence that it modifies.

dominantly subordinate: A mix of coordinate and subordinate cumulative modifying phrases in which there is more subordination than coordination.

ethos: The appeal of a piece of writing that is based on the character of the writer.

figurative language: Language that uses metaphors and similes.

final: Placement of a modifying phrase at the end of a sentence.

finite verb: A verb that occurs in a base clause and is inflected in relation to person and tense.

free modifier: A modifier that can be placed in any syntactic position relative to the base clause.

gerund phrase: A phrase that begins with a gerund (a verb that has been turned into a noun with an -ing ending).

heuristic: Having the characteristic of readily suggesting or generating a solution to a problem.

initial: Placement of a modifying phrase at the start of a sentence.

intransitive verb: A verb that does not require a direct object.

kernel sentence: The initial sentence to which more information is to be added in the form of modifiers.

left-branching sentence: A sentence in which the modifying phrase or phrases are placed to the left of the base clause.

linking verb: A verb that expresses a state of being.

logos: The appeal of a piece of writing that is based on reason and logic.

loose syntax: Syntax in which the modifying phrases are more free to move around.

medial: Placement of a modifying phrase in the middle of a sentence.

metaphor: A description of one thing in terms used to describe another.

misplaced modifier: A modifying phrase that, because of its placement, is unclear about what it modifies.

mixed syntax: A cumulative syntax in which there is a mix of both coordinate and subordinate modification.

noun phrase: A phrase that can act in a sentence as if it is a noun.

paradigmatic: Related to the choice of words or phrases in a sentence and their level of abstraction.

parallelism: In a sentence, a balance of two or more words, phrases, or clauses.

participial phrase: A phrase that begins with a present participle (a verb that ends in -ing) or a past participle (a verb that ends in -d, -ed, -en, -t, or -n).

pathos: The appeal of a piece of writing that is based on emotion.

periodic sentence: A sentence that delays or suspends the completion of its subject-verb clause until the very end (see also **suspensive sentence**).

phrase: A combination of words that functions as a single syntactical unit in a sentence but does not contain a finite verb and therefore cannot stand alone.

predicate: The part of a sentence that consists of what is said about the subject of the sentence.

prepositional phrase: A phrase that begins with a preposition and contains the object of the preposition and any modifiers of the object.

proposition: A statement in which the subject is affirmed or denied by the predicate.

pure subordinate: A sequence of modifiers, each modifying the phrase that immediately precedes it.

relative clause: A clause that begins with a relative pronoun such as *that*, *which*, or *who*.

right-branching sentence: A sentence in which the modifying phrase or phrases are placed to the right of the base clause.

simile: A description of one thing in terms of its similarity to another.

speculative phrase: A modifying phrase in a cumulative sentence that begins with a speculative expression such as *perhaps* or *as if*.

subordinate: In a cumulative sentence, a sequence of modifying phrases in which each phrase modifies the phrase that precedes it, moving the sentence toward more levels of specificity.

suspension: The deferring of the completion of a base clause to the very end of the sentence.

suspensive sentence: A sentence that saves the completion of the base clause till the very end (see also **periodic sentence**).

syntagmatic: Related to the order in which words or phrases are placed in a sentence.

transitive verb: A verb that requires a direct object.

verse libre: Verse that is not written in a regular metrical pattern.

Biographical Notes

Chris Anderson: Professor of English and noted writing teacher at Oregon State University, author of *Free/Style: A Direct Approach to Writing*.

Alexander Bain: Scottish rhetorician and University of Aberdeen professor whose 1866 *English Composition and Rhetoric* has greatly influenced contemporary theories of the paragraph.

Jacques Barzun: Professor of History and longtime dean at Columbia University. Author of dozens of books, including *Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (1975).

Thomas Berger: Celebrated American novelist best known as the author of *Little Big Man* and the four novels in the Reinhart Series: *Crazy in Berlin*, *Reinhart in Love*, *Vital Parts*, and *Reinhart's Women*. Other noteworthy novels include *Arthur Rex*, *Neighbors*, *The Feud*, and *Meeting Evil*. His 23 novels uniquely span a range of years and novel forms, and offer a mastery of prose style unmatched in contemporary American literature.

Jay David Bolter: Wesley Chair in New Media and a codirector of the Wesley Center for New Media Research and Education at Georgia Institute of Technology, and director of the Writing Program in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Tech. One of the pioneers of hypertext theory, Bolter is the author of *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing* and coauthor (with Richard Grusin) of *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

Richard Braddock: Former professor of English at the University of Iowa and a leader in composition research. He coauthored with R. Lloyd-Jones and L. Schoer the influential *Research in Written Composition* (1963). His “The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 8 (Winter, 1974) was one of the earliest critiques of Alexander Bain’s pronouncements concerning topic sentences in the paragraph.

Noam Chomsky: MIT professor of Linguistics, father of transformational grammar.

Francis Christensen: USC rhetorician and writing teacher who theorized the cumulative sentence. Author of *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: Six Essays for Teachers*.

Matthew Clark: Teaches ancient Greek culture and literature at York University. He is the author of *A Matter of Style*.

Robert J. Connors: Late Rhetoric and Composition scholar at the University of New Hampshire, author of “The Erasure of the Sentence,” *College Composition and Communication* 52:1 (2000).

Don DeLillo: Noted American novelist whose 15 books include *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, *The Body Artist*, *Cosmopolis*, and *Falling Man*.

Joan Didion: Celebrated American novelist and essayist, whose works include *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

William Faulkner: Nobel Prize-winning American novelist.

H. W. Fowler: Author of *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. The authoritative book on English usage which has been subsequently revised, first by Sir Ernest Gowers in 1965, and then by R. W. Burchfield in 2004.

William H. Gass: Celebrated and award-winning fiction writer, essayist, and philosopher. Gass is David May Distinguished University Professor Emeritus in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis, where for many years he taught philosophy and English. Just a few of his works that explore language, literature, and the glories of the sentence are *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971); *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1976); *The World Within The World* (1978); *Finding a Form* (1996), and *A Temple of Texts* (2006).

Walker Gibson: Former professor of English, University of Massachusetts. Author of several influential books on writing, including *Tough, Sweet, & Stuff*: *An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles*.

Richard L. Graves: Professor Emeritus of curriculum and teaching at Auburn University, author of several works devoted to prose style, including “A Primer for Teaching Style,” *College Composition and Communication* 25:2 (May, 1974).

M. A. K. Halliday: Coauthor of *Cohesion in English*.

Ruqaiya Hasan: Coauthor of *Cohesion in English*.

S. I. Hayakawa: Former English professor, college president, and influential general semanticist, author of the well-known textbook *Language in Thought and Action* (1949).

Ernest Hemingway: Nobel Prize-winning American novelist.

Lewis Hyde: Richard L. Thomas Professor of Creative Writing at Kenyon College. Author of *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983), which in a new edition has been retitled *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*.

James L. Kinneavy: Late English professor and professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at Austin. Kinneavy was highly influential in shaping the field of rhetoric and composition; his *A Theory of Discourse* (1971) is a foundational work of discourse theory.

Martha Kolln: Former English professor at Pennsylvania State University and an authority on composition, grammar, and rhetoric. Author of several books on grammar and writing, including *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*.

Carl H. Klaus: Professor Emeritus, English Department, University of Iowa, where he was instrumental in founding the MFA Program in Nonfiction Writing. An expert on prose style and on the essay and a noted stylist himself, Klaus is the author of four works of creative nonfiction: *Letters to Kate: Life After Life*; *My Vegetable Love: A Journal of a Growing Season*; *Taking Retirement: A Beginner's Diary*; and *Weathering Winter: A Gardner's Daybook*. He is the editor or coeditor of *Style in English Prose*; *In Depth: Essayists for Our Time*; and *Courses for Change in Writing*.

George P. Landow: Professor of English and the History of Art at Brown University and one of the pioneering scholars of electronic textuality. His books on hypertext and multimedia writing include the coedited *Hypermedia and Literary Studies* (MIT, 1991), and *The Digital Word* (1993), and he is the author of *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Hopkins, 1992) and *Hypertext 2.0* (1997). He has also edited *Hyper/Text/Theory* (Hopkins, 1994).

Richard A. Lanham: Professor Emeritus of English at UCLA, where he earned an impressive reputation as a rhetorician and prose style scholar. His books include *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (1991) (the standard reference in the field); *Analyzing Prose* (2nd ed., 2003); *Style: An Anti-Textbook*; *Literacy and the Survival of Humanism* (1974); and *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (1993). He is also the author of *Revising Prose* (1979), and *Revising Business Prose* (1981), both now in their 4th editions).

Ursula K. Le Guin: One of the most acclaimed American writers of science fiction and fantasy, Le Guin is also the author of a writing guidebook, *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*.

Glen A. Love: Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Oregon and a pioneering ecocritic. Coeditor with Michael Payne of the influential collection of stylistic theory, *Contemporary Essays on Style: Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Criticism*.

Bronislaw Malinowski: Pioneering Polish anthropologist and ethnographer and Yale professor whose works include the essay that first theorized phatic communication: “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” in C. K. Ogden’s and I. A. Richards’ *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*.

Josephine Miles: Poet and critic, the first woman to be tenured in the Berkeley English Department. Author of *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry*, a rigorous attempt to theorize period style through quantitative means.

Walter J. Ong: Late professor of English at St. Louis University, Jesuit priest, and noted literary critic and cultural commentator. Of his many publications, I have drawn most heavily from *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

William Morrison Patterson: Professor of English at Columbia in the early years of the 20th century. Author of *The Rhythm of Prose: An Experimental Investigation of Individual Difference in the Sense of Rhythm* (1916).

Michael Payne: Coeditor with Glen A. Love of the influential collection of stylistic theory, *Contemporary Essays on Style: Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Criticism*.

Thomas Pynchon: Reclusive American novelist, generally considered one of the leading postmodern writers, author of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Vineland*, *Against the Day*, and numerous other major novels.

Herbert Read: English poet, literary and art critic, author of *English Prose Style*.

George Saintsbury: Professor of Rhetoric and English at the University of Edinburgh in the early 20th century, author of the influential *A History of English Prosody*.

Edgar H. Schuster: Writing teacher and author of *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*.

Gertrude Stein: Famed modernist writer, author of more than 600 experimental works in almost every imaginable literary genre.

John Steinbeck: Nobel Prize-winning American novelist and author of the nonfiction *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* and *Travels with Charley*.

Arthur A. Stern: Professor Emeritus, Teacher's College, Columbia University.

William Strunk Jr.: Longtime English professor at Cornell University whose "little book," a writing guide for his students, forms the core of *The Elements of Style*.

Lewis Thomas: Noted educator and physician known for his superb science writing; author of *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* and *Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher*.

Virginia Tufte: English Professor Emeritus at USC and author of several books on prose style, including *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, generally recognized as the best study of sentence style.

John R. Trimble: English professor and Advanced Expository Writing pioneer at the University of Texas. His *Writing with Style* is one of the most influential writing texts in the United States.

Winston Weathers: Influential writing teacher, coauthor with Otis Winchester of *The New Strategy of Style, Copy and Compose*, and other texts. In his *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, Weathers made the famous case for Grammar B, an innovative and unfettered writing style to complement the traditional and limiting standards of most writing instruction.

E. B. White: Famed essayist and *New Yorker* author, revised and added to a writing handbook created by Professor Will Strunk for his students at Cornell, resulting in *The Elements of Style*, probably the best known writing guidebook in the United States.

Otis Winchester: Influential writing teacher, coauthor with Winston Weathers of *The New Strategy of Style, Copy and Compose*, and other texts.

Tom Wolfe: Novelist and journalist, one of the leading proponents and practitioners of the New Journalism.

Virginia Woolf: Novelist and essayist known as one of the most important literary modernists.

Marguerite Young: American writer, social critic, and writing teacher, author of *Inviting the Muses: Stories, Essays, Reviews*.

William Zinsser: Noted journalist and writing teacher, and author of the influential and widely used *On Writing Well*.

Bibliography

Primary texts:

Almost everything. Seriously. The study of English prose style in general and of sentences in particular profits from nothing so much as from wide reading—of all sorts and kinds, fiction and nonfiction, from all periods and all writers who write in or whose work has been translated into English. Just a few of the writers who have most guided my thinking about prose style, primarily because they pay so much attention to the crafting of their own sentences are, in no particular order: Thomas Berger, Jonathan Lethem, John Updike, Marilynne Robinson, Joan Didion, Nicholson Baker, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gabriel García Márquez, James Joyce, Don DeLillo, Octavia Butler, Carl Klaus, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O'Connor, James Alan McPherson, Thomas Pynchon, William Gibson, Karen Joy Fowler, Ursula K. Le Guin, William Gass, James Hynes, Cormac McCarthy, Tom Wolfe, Mark Leyner, Gertrude Stein, Kathy Acker, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Robert Coover, Susan Sontag. Any list such as this one is always a travesty, and I'm sure I'll regret leaving out other writers whose works have influenced me: Read everything!

Collections of Creative Essays and Stylistic Samples:

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Editors of *Esquire* (compiled by). *Mom, The Flag, & Apple Pie: Great American Writers on Great American Things*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.

Klaus, Carl H., ed. *Style in English Prose*. New York: Macmillan, 1968. I drew many of my examples from this collection, and Klaus's introductory essay, "Reflections on Prose Style," is indispensable for any serious student of style.

Klaus, Carl H., Chris Anderson, Rebecca Faery. *In Depth: Essayists For Our Time*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.

Levin, David, and Howard E. Hugo, eds. *Varieties of English and American Prose*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962.

Miles, Josephine, ed. *Classic Essays in English*. 2nd ed. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1965.

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Smart, William. *Eight Modern Essayists*. 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.

Writing Guidebooks:

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Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. Zen and the art of writing.

Hale, Constance. *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999. The first serious style guide for writing in the late age of print? Hale, a former editor at *Wired*, writes for those whose writing may appear online.

Hodges, John C., and Mary E. Whitten, eds. *Harbrace College Handbook*. 7th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. This happens to be the edition I used when I first started teaching; subsequent editions are probably preferable.

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King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000. It works for him!

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*. Portland, Oregon: Eighth Mountain Press, 1998. A beautiful little book from a wonderful writer!

Scholes, Robert, and Carl H. Klaus. *Elements of Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1972. A fascinating step-by-step exploration of writing that is more contemplation than a guidebook.

Schuster, Edgar H. *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. More fun than a barrel of monkeys—and about how many books on writing can that be said!

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